



Leon Kass

2009 Jefferson Lecturer

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Thank you very much, Prof. McClay, for your most kind and generous introduction.

"Looking for an Honest Man:
Reflections of an
Unlicensed Humanist"

By Leon R. Kass

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(as prepared for delivery)

Chairman Watson, members of the National Council on the Humanities and staff of the National Endowment for the Humanities, ladies

and gentlemen. I am profoundly grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for the great honor you have bestowed upon me. And I thank you all for your honoring presence here this evening.

Now that this hour has arrived, I must finally accept the fact that tonight's lecture is really mine to deliver. When Chairman Bruce Cole called last autumn to invite me to give the next Jefferson Lecture, my stunned silence covered a barely stifled "Who, *me?*" I knew well the roster of humanist giants who had gone before. Whilst a member of the NEH Council, I had

helped to select six or seven of them, and I even had the honor of introducing Gertrude Himmelfarb and Leszek Kolakowski for their Jefferson Lectures. What in the world could the Endowment be thinking? The fields for which I have trained, medicine and biochemistry, I neither practice nor teach. For the fields in which I teach and practice, I have no formal training. I am but an amateur humanist, not only without great scholarly distinction but also without a license.

It is true that I have long been devoted to liberal education, and along with my wife, Amy Kass, and a few other colleagues at the University of Chicago, I helped found a successful common core humanities course, "Human Being and Citizen," as well as an unusual B.A. program, "Fundamentals: Issues and Texts," which I chaired for many years, that emphasizes basic human questions pursued through the intensive study of classic texts. I have also raised high the oft-abandoned banner of humanistic inquiry, and have tried in my teaching and writing to show its indispensable value for living thoughtfully and choosing wisely in our hyper-technological age. In addition, I have been willing to speak up in defense of our threatened human dignity, seeking to remind our contemporaries of forgotten truths that, in a more sensible age, would have needed no defense. Finally, perhaps *because* I am an *unlicensed* humanist, I have pursued the humanities for an old-fashioned purpose in an old-fashioned way: I have sought wisdom about the meaning of our humanity, largely through teaching and studying the great works of wiser and nobler human beings, who have bequeathed to us their profound accounts of the human condition.

This lecture is, in part, an attempt to make sense of my adopted career as unlicensed humanist. I offer it not as an *apologia pro vita mea*, but rather in the belief that my own intellectual journey is of more than idiosyncratic interest. Although the path I have followed is surely peculiar, the quest for my humanity is a search for what we all have in common. The point is not what *I* have learned, but rather what I have *learned* and, therefore, what *anyone* can learn with and through the humanities. This lecture is, most of all, my expression of gratitude to the National Endowment for the Humanities and, especially, to the Republic of Letters for which it stands.

Everyone has heard the story of Diogenes the Cynic who went around the sunlit streets of Athens, lantern in hand, looking for an honest man. This same Diogenes, when he heard Plato being praised for defining man as “an animal, biped and featherless,” threw a plucked chicken into the Academy, saying, “Here is Platonic man!” These tales display Diogenes’ cynicism as both ethical and philosophical: he is remembered for mocking the possibility of finding human virtue and for mocking the possibility of knowing human nature. In these respects, the legendary Diogenes would feel right at home today in many an American university, where a professed interest in human nature and human excellence—or, more generally, in truth and goodness—invites reactions ranging from mild ridicule for one’s naiveté to outright denunciation for one’s attraction to such discredited and dangerous notions.

Tracing the stories about Diogenes the Cynic to their source, in Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, one discovers that the apocryphal story is somewhat embroidered if not incorrect. Yes, Diogenes lit a lantern in broad daylight, but he did not say he was looking for an honest man. What he said was, “I am looking for [or ‘seeking’] human being”—*anthrôpon zeto*—either a human being or the human being, either an *exemplar* or the *idea* of humanity, or both. To be sure, purporting to seek the answer by means of candlepower affirms Diogenes’ badge as cynic. But the picture also suggests a man who refuses to be taken in by complacent popular beliefs that we already know human goodness from our daily experience or by confident professorial claims that we can capture the mystery of our humanity in definitions. But mocking or not, and perhaps speaking better than he knew, Diogenes gave elegantly simple expression to the humanist quest for self-knowledge: I seek the human being—my human being, your human being, our humanity. In fact, the embellished version of Diogenes’ question comes to the same thing: to seek an *honest* man is, at once, to seek a human being worthy of the name, an honest-to-goodness exemplar of the idea of humanity, a truthful and truth-speaking embodiment of the animal having the power of articulate speech.

Boasting only of having undertaken his search without a grain of cynicism, I confess myself an inheritor of Diogenes’ quest. In place of a lantern, I have lit my journey with the light of books great and good, and, equally important, with the company of teachers and students, friends and loved ones, who were on a similar quest.

I began my travels not with this question, but rather with its answer. I was reared in a Yiddish speaking, secular Jewish home, a first-generation American whose parents, of blessed memory—a saintly father and a moralist mother—had immigrated via Canada from the Ukraine and from Poland. God having been left behind, along with the Czar and the Russian Revolution, “humanity” was the focus of all that my parents tried to teach. The Yiddish translation of “*anthrôpos*” or “human being” is *mentsch*, a wonderfully capacious notion at once prosaically descriptive and inspiringly normative. To be *mentschlich* is to be humane, behaving decently and considerately toward others; but it is also to be *human*, displaying in one’s character and conduct the species-specific dignity advertised in our uniquely upright

posture. *Menschlichkeit*, “humanity,” the disposition and practice of both “humaneness” and “human-ness,” was thus the quasi-religious teaching of my home, and its content—wholly moral and wholly appealing—went unquestioned: personal integrity and honesty, self-respect and personal responsibility, consideration and respect for every human person (also equally a *mentsch*), compassion for the less fortunate, and a concern for fairness, justice, and righteousness. To become and to be a *mentsch*: that was the conscious and articulated goal toward which all of my early rearing was directed.

Two things I did not understand until much later. First, I did not know that the Yiddishkeit of my youth—with its universalism and quasi-socialism—represented a deliberate cultural alternative to traditional Judaism, on whose teachings it was in fact parasitic: the prophets, one might say, without the Law. Second, I did not appreciate that the content of *mentschlichkeit* was in fact a disputable question, and that there were—and are—large differences of opinion, and even irresolvable tensions, regarding its meaning. The latter error was the first to be corrected. Indeed, my foray into the humanities would begin in earnest only when I discovered that the injunction to “be a *mentsch*” required serious reflection, both philosophical and ethical, on the meaning of our humanity.

The seeds of such reflection, bearing fruit only years later, were planted at the University of Chicago. There, in the still living remains of the college created by Robert Hutchins, I first encountered philosophical questions beyond the domain of ethics, as well as some of the competing answers to questions about human nature and human good. I was introduced to the idea of learning as an end in itself, fulfilling our human capacity for understanding. I acquired an educational prejudice in favor of discussing the great questions and reading the Great Books, though it would take several years before I learned why these prejudices were justified. I witnessed up close the dignity of the life of teaching, for we were taught by an exemplary faculty, tenured not for their record of publications but for their devotion to teaching and for devising an integrated course of study that could turn young ignoramuses into liberally educated men and women. In Socratic spirit, they insisted that we examine *all* our intellectual assumptions and starting points, and they encouraged us to put fundamental philosophical questions even to the natural sciences: What is the relation between matter and form? What makes an organism a unified and living whole? What is the nature of the psyche or soul?

These sorts of questions lay dormant as I entered upon a brief career in medicine, in retrospect another important station on the path to the human. Preclinical studies left me in awe of the marvel that is the human body and the stunning events beneath the surface that sustain our existence and enable our remarkable interactions with the world. Clinical experience left me in awe of the privilege—and peril—of offering a helping hand to fellow human beings in times of crisis. Although I could not then articulate it, I was also mindful of the rare privilege, given solely to physicians, to be admitted to the inner sanctum of the patient’s world, where we witness human beings, stripped of pretence and sustained only by hope, trust, and the love of kith and kin, negotiate not only their sicknesses and suffering, but also the anxiety of being face-to-face with their own mortality. Not for nothing were medieval textbooks of medicine entitled, *De Homine*—“On Man,” or “On the Human Being.” Not for nothing was medicine once an honored branch on the humanistic tree.

Yet precisely around the subject of our humanity, I found something missing. The science was indeed powerful, but its self-understanding left much to be desired. It knew the human parts in ever finer detail, but it concerned itself little with the human whole. Medicine, then

and now, has no concept of the human being, of the peculiar and remarkable concretion of psyche and soma that makes us that most strange and wonderful among the creatures. Psychiatry, then and even more now, is so little chagrined by its failure to say what the psyche or soul *is* that it denies its existence altogether. The art of healing does not inquire into what health is, or how to get and keep it: the word “health” does not occur in the index of the leading textbooks of medicine. To judge from the way we measure medical progress, largely in terms of mortality statistics and defeats of deadly diseases, one gets the unsettling impression that the tacit goal of medicine is not health but rather bodily immortality, with every death today regarded as a tragedy that future medical research will prevent. And, coming down from theory to practice, I found that I loved my patients and their stories more than I loved solving the puzzle of their diseases; where my colleagues found disease fascinating, I was fascinated more by the patients—how they lived, how they struggled with their suffering. Above all, I hated the autopsy room, not out of fear of death, but because the post mortem exam could never answer my question: What happened to my patient? The clot in his coronary artery, his ruptured bowel, or whatever diseased body part that the pathologist displayed as the putative explanation of his death was utterly incommensurable with the awesome massive fact, the *extinction* of this never-to-be repeated human being, for whom I had cared and for whom his survivors now grieve.

Despite these inchoate reservations, however, I continued to follow the path of science, indeed to an even more molecular level. I entered the PhD program in biochemistry and molecular biology at Harvard, and was privileged to share in the great excitement of the golden age of molecular biology. Working happily on my own project, I tasted the great pleasures of independent discovery. But my biggest discovery came outside of the laboratory.

In summer 1965, interrupting my research, Amy and I went to Mississippi to do civil rights work. We lived with a farmer couple in rural Holmes County, in a house with no telephone, hot water, or indoor toilet. We visited many families in the community, participated in their activities, and helped with voter registration and other efforts to encourage the people to organize themselves in defense of their rights. This deeply moving experience changed my life, but not in the way I expected.

For on returning to Cambridge, I was nagged by a disparity I could not explain between the uneducated, poor black farmers in Mississippi and many of my privileged, highly educated graduate student friends at Harvard. A man of the left, I had unthinkingly held the Enlightenment view of the close connection between intellectual and moral virtue: education and progress in science and technology would overcome superstition, poverty, and misery, allowing human beings to become at last the morally superior creatures that only nature’s stinginess and religious or social oppression had kept them from being. Yet in Mississippi I saw people living honorably in perilous and meager circumstances, many of them illiterate, but sustained by religion, extended family, and community attachment, and by the pride of honest farming and homemaking. Indeed, they seemed to display more integrity, decency, and strength of character, and less self-absorption and self-indulgence, than did many of my high-minded Harvard friends who shared my progressive opinions. How could this be?

In summer 1966, my closest friend had me read Rousseau’s explosive *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, for which my Mississippi and Harvard experiences had prepared me. Rousseau argues that, *pace* the Enlightenment, progress in the arts and sciences necessarily produces luxury, augments inequality, debases tastes, softens character, corrupts morals, and weakens patriotism, leading ultimately not to human emancipation but to human servitude.

Rousseau complains that writers and “idle men of letters”—the equivalent of our public intellectuals, not to say professors—subvert decent opinion and corrupt the citizens: “These vain and futile declaimers go everywhere armed with their deadly paradoxes, undermining the foundations of faith and annihilating virtue. They smile disdainfully at the old-fashioned words of fatherland and religion, and devote their talents and philosophy to destroying and debasing all that is sacred among men.”

And he complains that formal education corrupts the young: “I see everywhere immense institutions where young people are brought up at great expense, learning everything except their duties. . . . Without knowing how to distinguish error from truth, [your children] will possess the art of making them both unrecognizable to others by specious arguments. But they will not know what the words magnanimity, equity, temperance, humanity, courage are; that sweet name fatherland will never strike their ear; and if they hear of God, it will be less to be awed by him than to be afraid of him.” Nowadays, Rousseau might say instead that if they hear of God, it is less to be awed by him than to mock him.

Could Rousseau be right? Is it really true that the natural home of intellectual progress is not the natural home of moral and civic virtue? Is it really true that, as the arts and sciences climb upward, so morals, taste, and citizenship slide downward, and, what’s worse, that the rise of the former causes the fall of the latter? If so, all that I had believed about the simple harmony between intellectual and moral progress was called into question. And if the Enlightenment view was not correct, what should I think instead? For the first time in my life, I acquired some real questions, pressing questions, more challenging than those one can answer in the laboratory. A crevice had opened in my understanding of *mentschlichkeit*, between the humane commitments of compassion and equality and the human aspiration to excellence and upright dignity.

This crevice would widen with the two books I read right after Rousseau, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and C. S. Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man*. The first depicts a future society that—through genetic engineering, psychoactive drugs, and applied psychology—has succeeded in ridding the world of all the evils against which compassionate humanitarianism today does battle—war, poverty, and disease; anxiety, suffering, and guilt; hatred, envy, and grief—only to have it peopled by creatures of human shape but of stunted humanity. They consume, fornicate, take “soma,” enjoy the “feelies” and “centrifugal bumble-puppy,” and operate the machinery that makes it all possible. They do not read, write, think, love, or govern themselves. Art and science, virtue and religion, family and friendship are all passé. No one aspires to anything higher than bodily health and immediate gratification. Worst of all, the denizens of the Brave New World are so dehumanized that they have no idea of what they are missing.

According to C. S. Lewis, the dehumanization threatened by the mastery of nature has, at its *deepest* cause, less the emerging biotechnologies that might directly denature bodies and flatten souls, more the underlying value-neutral, soulless and heartless accounts that science proffers of living nature and of man. By expunging from its account of life any notion of soul, aspiration, and purpose, and by setting itself against the evidence of our lived experience, modern biology ultimately undermines our *self-understanding* as creatures of freedom and dignity, as well as our inherited teachings regarding how to live, teachings linked to philosophical anthropologies that science has now seemingly dethroned.

For me, the search for *anthrôpos* suddenly acquired genuine urgency and poignancy, as

these threats to our humanity came not from bigots and tyrants but from the rightly celebrated well-wishers and benefactors of humankind. Could we continue to reap the benefits of our new biology and our emerging biotechnologies without eroding our freedom and dignity? What features of our humanity most needed defending, both in practice and in thought? What solid ideas of human nature and human good could be summoned to the cause?

Pursuit of these questions would require a change of direction and a different approach to human affairs. In 1970, I put away scalpel and microscope to take up directly Diogenes' search for *anthrôpos*, hoping by studying not the hidden parts of the human being but the manifest activities of the whole, visible in broad daylight, the better to understand his honest-to-goodness humanity and to help promote his true flourishing. Without realizing it, I became a humanist.

At that time, some scientists and humanists, not a few of them enthusiasts of a "post-human" future, were addressing the gap between our science and our ethics by proposing a new, "science-based ethics" and by calling upon us to "keep up" with, and to adapt ourselves to, the massive changes in human life caused by galloping scientific and technological progress. But my intuitions led me in the opposite direction: to try to correct the deficiencies of our scientific understanding of human nature, and to reinforce, where possible, the best of what we have learned about human goodness and human flourishing. In these pursuits, I have sought out the best that has been said and thought by those who have gone before—not because they are old and not because they are ours, but because they might help us discover vital truths that we would otherwise not see on our own. No friend of humanity should trade the accumulated wisdom about human nature and human flourishing for some half-cocked promise to produce a superior human being or human society, never mind a post-human future, before he has taken the trouble to look deeply, with all the help he can get, into the matter of our humanity—what it is, why it matters, and how we can be all that we can be.

As I look back over the nearly forty years since I left the world of science to reflect on its human meaning, three distinct but related pursuits stand out: First, addressing the conceptual danger, stressed by Lewis, of a soul-less science of life, I have worked toward a more natural science, truer to life as lived. Second, addressing the practical danger, stressed by Huxley, of dehumanization resulting from the relief of man's estate, I have worked toward a richer picture of human dignity and human flourishing. And third, addressing the social and political dangers, stressed by Rousseau, of cultural decay and enfeeblement, I have looked for cultural teachings that could keep us strong in heart and soul, no less than in body and bank account. Let me, in the time remaining, share with you a few high points from these three inquiries.

Finding a "more natural science" would serve two important goals. First, by doing justice to life as lived, it would correct the slander perpetrated upon all of living nature, and upon human nature in particular, in treating the glorious activities of life as mere epiphenomena of changes in the underlying matter or mere devices for the replication of DNA. Second, and more positively, by offering a richer account of human nature faithful both to our animality *and* to the human difference, it might provide pointers toward how we might best live and flourish. Toward both goals, a "more natural science" examines directly the primary activities of life as we creatures experience them and revisits certain discredited or neglected notions, once thought indispensable for understanding the being and doing of all higher animals.

Against the materialists who believe that all vital activities can be *fully* understood by describing the electrochemical changes in the underlying matter, I saw the necessity of

appreciating the activities of life in their own terms, and as known from the inside: what it means to hunger, feel, see, imagine, think, desire, seek, suffer, enjoy. At the same time, against those humanists, who, conceding to mechanistic science all truths about our bodies, locate our humanity solely in consciousness or will or reason, I saw the necessity of appreciating the profound meaning of our distinctive embodiment. So, for example, I learned from Erwin Straus the humanizing significance of the upright posture: how our standing-in-the-world, gained only through conscious effort against the pull of gravity, prefigures all our artful efforts to overcome nature's indifference to human aspiration; how our arms, supremely mobile in our personalized action space, fit us for the socializing activities of embracing, cradling, pointing, caressing, and holding hands, no less than for the selfish activities of grasping, fighting, and getting food to mouth; how our eyes, no longer looking down a snout to find what is edible, are lifted instead to the horizon, enabling us to take in an entire vista and to conceive an enduring world beyond the ephemeral here and now; how our refashioned mammalian mouth (and respiratory system) equips us for the possibility of speech—and kissing; and how our expressive face is fit to meet, greet, and sometimes love the faces that we meet, face-to-face, side-by-side, and arm-in-arm. From Adolf Portmann, I discovered the deeper meaning of the looks of animals, whose intricate surface beauty, not fully explained by its contributions to protective coloration or sexual selection, serves also to communicate inward states to fellow creatures and to announce, in the language of visibility, an animal's unique species and individual identity. I even found evidence for natural teleology in, of all places, *The Origin of Species*, in which Darwin makes clear that evolution by natural selection requires, and takes as biologically given, the purposive drive of all organisms for self-preservation and for reproduction—a drive the existence of which is a mystery unexplainable by natural selection.

But the greatest help came, most unexpectedly, from studying pre-modern philosophers of nature, in particular Aristotle. I turned to his *De Anima (On Soul)*, expecting to get help with understanding the difference between a living human being and its corpse, relevant for the difficult task of determining whether some persons on a respirator are alive or dead. I discovered to my amazement that Aristotle has almost no interest in the difference between the living and the dead. Instead, one learns most about life and soul not, as we moderns might suspect, from the boundary conditions when an organism comes into being or passes away, but rather when the organism is at its peak, its capacious body actively at work in energetic relation to—that is, in “souling”—the world: in the activities of sensing, imagining, desiring, moving, and thinking. Even more surprising, in place of our dualistic ideas of soul as either a “ghost in the machine,” invoked by some in order to save the notion of free will, or as a separate immortal entity that departs the body at the time of death, invoked by others to address the disturbing fact of apparent personal extinction, Aristotle offers a powerful and still defensible holistic idea of soul as “the form of a naturally organic body.” “Soul” names the unified powers of aliveness, awareness, action, and appetite that living things all manifest.

This is not mysticism or superstition, but biological fact, albeit one that, against current prejudice, recognizes the difference between mere material and its empowering form. Consider, for example, the eye. The eye's power of sight, though it “resides in” and is inseparable from material, is not itself material. Its light-absorbing *chemicals* do not *see* the light they absorb. Like any organ, the eye has extension, takes up space, can be touched and grasped by the hand. But neither the power of the eye—sight—nor sight's activity—seeing—is extended, touchable, corporeal. They are powers and activities of soul, relying on the underlying materials but not reducible to them. Moreover, sight and seeing are not knowable through our objectified science, but only through lived experience. A blind neuroscientist

could give precise quantitative details regarding electrical discharges in the eye produced by the stimulus of light, and a blind craftsman could with instruction construct a good material model of the eye; but sight and seeing can be known only by one who sees.

Even the passions of the soul are not reducible to the materials of the body. True, anger, as ancient naturalists used to say, is a heating of the blood around the heart or an increase in the bilious humor, or, as we now might say, a rising concentration of a certain polypeptide in the brain. But these partial accounts, stressing only the material conditions, cannot reveal the larger truth about anger: anger, *humanly* understood, is a painful feeling that seeks revenge for perceived slight or insult. To understand the human truth about anger and its serious consequences, we must instead listen to the poets, beginning with Homer's *Iliad*: "Wrath, sing, o goddess, of Peleus' son Achilles, and the woes thousand-fold it brought upon the Achaians, sending to Hades strong souls of heroes but leaving themselves to be the delicate feastings of dogs and birds." And to understand how we come to know this or any other truth, we can never stop wondering how—marvel of marvels—Homer's winged words carry their intelligible and soul-shaping meanings, hitched to merely physical waves of sound, from the soul of genius to the hearts and minds of endless generations of attentive and sympathetic readers.

If my first major pursuit was a richer view of human nature, looking afresh at the unadorned powers of the human animal, my second major pursuit was a richer account of the human good and the good human, one that would reflect the richer anthropology just discussed and one that could counter Brave New Worldly and other shrunken views of human happiness and goodness. Not surprisingly, the disagreements of the great authors regarding the human good are even greater than those regarding human nature. Yet once again, the ancient philosophers offer a soul-expanding teaching, and none more so than Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, a book that I have taught a dozen times and that transformed how I look at ethics and human flourishing.

For most Americans, ethical matters are usually discussed either in utilitarian terms of weighing competing goods or balancing benefits and harms, looking to the greatest good for the greatest number, or in moralist terms of rules, rights and duties, "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots." Our public ethical discourse is largely negative and "other-directed": we focus on condemning and avoiding misconduct by, or on correcting and preventing injustice to, other people, not on elevating or improving ourselves. How liberating and encouraging, then, to encounter an ethics focused on the question, "How to live?" and that situates what we call the moral life in the larger context of human flourishing. How eye-opening are arguments that suggest that happiness is not a state of passive feeling but a life of fulfilling activity, and especially of the unimpeded and excellent activity of our specifically human powers—of acting and making, of thinking and learning, of loving and befriending. How illuminating it is to see the ethical life discussed not in terms of benefits and harms or rules of right and wrong, but in terms of character, and to understand that good character, formed through habituation, is more than holding right opinions or having "good values," but is a binding of heart and mind that frees us from enslaving passions and frees us for fine and beautiful deeds. How encouraging it is to read an account of human life—the only such account in our philosophical tradition—that speaks at length and profoundly about friendship, culminating in the claim that the most fulfilling form of friendship is the sharing of speeches and thoughts. And how exhilarating to verify that claim when Aristotle utters it because of the delight we have already experienced by participating in the illuminating speeches and thoughts of its author, Aristotle, our philosophical friend.

But perhaps the most remarkable feature of Aristotle's teaching concerns the goals of ethical conduct. Unlike the moralists, Aristotle does not say that morality is a thing of absolute worth or that the virtuous man acts in order to adhere to a moral rule or universalizable maxim. And unlike the utilitarians, he does not say morality is good because it contributes to civic peace or private gain and reputation. Instead, Aristotle says over and over again that the ethically excellent human being acts *for the sake of the noble, for the sake of the beautiful*. The human being of fine character seeks to display his own fineness in word and in deed, to show the harmony of his soul in action and the rightness of his choice in the doing of graceful and gracious deeds. The beauty of his action has less to do with the cause that his action will serve or the additional benefits that will accrue to himself or another—though there usually will be such benefits. It has, rather, everything to do with showing forth in action the beautiful soul at work, exactly as a fine dancer dances for the sake of dancing finely. As the ballerina both exploits and resists the downward pull of gravity to rise freely and gracefully above it, so the person of ethical virtue exploits and elevates the necessities of our embodied existence to act freely and gracefully above them. Fine conduct is the beautiful and intrinsically fulfilling being-at-work of the harmonious or excellent soul.

With his attractive picture of human flourishing, Aristotle offers lasting refuge against the seas of moral relativism. Taking us on a tour of the museum of the virtues—from courage and moderation, through liberality, magnificence, greatness of soul, ambition, and gentleness, to the social virtues of friendliness, truthfulness, and wit—and displaying each of their portraits as a mean between two corresponding vices, Aristotle gives us direct and immediate experience in seeing the humanly beautiful. Anyone who cannot see that courage is more beautiful than cowardice or rashness, or that liberality is more beautiful than miserliness or prodigality, suffers, one might say, from the moral equivalent of color-blindness.

Yet despite its power and beauty, the picture of human excellence and human flourishing presented in the *Nicomachean Ethics* leaves something to be desired, especially given the needs of modern readers in modern times. What help in thinking about their own possible flourishing are my democratic students really getting from learning to appreciate Aristotle's great-souled-man? The virtues of civic life in the polis, beautiful though they still are, seem rather remote from everyday life in urban America, where sympathy, decency, consideration, integrity, and personal responsibility—*mentschlichkeit*—are more relevant and needed than battlefield courage, magnificence, or magnanimity. Yet, sad to report, many of today's students have had little rearing in foundational *mentschlichkeit*, so that efforts to lift their gaze to the ceiling of human greatness sometimes seem chimerical, given that the ethical floorboards on which they culturally stand are rather wobbly. Moreover, preoccupations with personal nobility often ignore matters of social justice and the larger public good. And looking only toward the beautiful best shortchanges the loveliness—and even more the obligations—of ordinary human lives, lived in families, friendships, neighborhoods, schools, and houses of worship—all of which, and especially the houses of worship, are, as Aristotle himself points out, surely more efficacious in forming our character than is studying the writings of great philosophers.

Accordingly, in my third pursuit, spurred also by a concern for the state of our mores, I shifted my anthropological quest from the side of nature to the side of culture, seeking to know the human being not directly, in his nakedness, but indirectly, through an examination of the clothes that fit him best—the clothes of custom, law, song, and story, the works of culture and the materials of tradition, that work to bring out the best of which we are capable. My goal was still the same, but my focus was now the civil and civilizing habits, mores, and

opinions that regulate everyday life and that make for human self-command and human flourishing in the domains of work, family, and the plethora of human affairs comprising civil society today. One result was a book, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature*, that began with philosophical reflections on human nature but moved quickly to discussions of the perfecting customs governing human appetite and eating, from the taboo against cannibalism and the duties of hospitality, to table manners and the virtue of moderation, to festive dining elevated by refinements of taste and wit, to the sanctification of the meal, begun with grace and experienced in gratitude. These explorations of mine were greatly assisted by the writings of Homer and Herodotus, Plato and Erasmus, Tolstoy and Isak Dinesen, and by the Bible. In addition, as part of a larger group project on the ethics of everyday life, Amy and I published *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar*, an anthology on courting and marrying, in the service of helping people become more thoughtful about—and more successful in—finding a soul-mate with whom to make a life. Humanistic works from across the ages—from the Bible’s Jacob and Rachel, through Plato’s *Symposium* and Erasmus’ *On Courtship*, to Shakespeare’s Rosalind and Orlando, Jane Austen’s Elizabeth and Darcy, and Tolstoy’s Pierre and Natasha, to Robert Frost’s “The Master Speed”—challenge our unexamined prejudices, expand our horizons, sharpen our vision, and elevate our taste by illuminating the nature of human longings and the more promising pathways to their fulfillment.

Any humanist seriously interested in the norms and customs governing everyday life cannot help noticing, later if not sooner, the prominent—not to say preeminent—role that our scriptural traditions have played and still play, often invisibly, in the opinions and teachings that guide us, as well as in the humanistic writings of our remote and recent past. And anyone devoted to teaching the *great* books of our tradition would surely want to see for himself just what the Good Book has to say for itself, not relying on hearsay. So it was that my search for the well-clothed human being eventually led me to study—at first, because I had to teach them—the books of the Hebrew Bible. Suspending disbelief, approaching the Bible with open mind and trying to allow the text to teach me how it wishes to be read, I have been astonished to discover an account of human life that can more than hold its own with the anthropological and ethical teachings offered by the great poets and philosophers.

I have discovered in the Hebrew Bible teachings of righteousness, humaneness, and human dignity—at the source of my parents’ teachings of *mentschlichkeit*—that were undreamt of in my prior philosophizing. In the idea that human beings are equally god-like, equally created in the image of the divine, I have seen the core principle of a humanistic and democratic politics, respectful of each and every human being. In the Sabbath injunction to desist regularly from work and the flux of getting and spending, I have discovered an invitation to step outside of time, in *imitatio dei*, to contemplate the beauty of the world and to feel gratitude for its—and our—existence. In the injunction to honor your Father and your Mother, I have seen the foundation of a dignified family life, for each of us the nursery of our humanization and the first vehicle of cultural transmission. I have satisfied myself that there is no conflict between the Bible, rightly read, and modern science, and that the account of creation in Genesis 1 offers “not words of information but words of appreciation,” as Abraham Joshua Heschel put it: “not a description of how the world came into being but a song about the glory of the world’s having come into being.” And thanks to my biblical studies, I have been moved to new attitudes of gratitude, awe, and attention. For just as the world as created is a world summoned into existence under command, so to be a human being in that world—to be a *mentsch*—is to live in search of our summons. It is to recognize that we are here not by choice or on account of merit, but as an undeserved gift from powers not at our disposal. It is to feel

the need to justify that gift, to make something out of our indebtedness for the opportunity of existence. It is to stand in the world not only in awe of its and our existence but under an obligation to answer a call to a worthy life, a life that does honor to the special powers and possibilities—the divine-likeness—with which our otherwise animal existence has been, no thanks to us, endowed.

Just as today's natural sciences profit but also suffer from their having broken away from their once honored place within humanistic learning—gaining precise, objectified knowledge of nature's workings, but at the price of neglecting the works of nature's beings—so the humanities today profit but mainly suffer from having forgotten that the humanities took their origin and point of departure in contradistinction to the “divinities”—the inquiry into matters metaphysical and ultimately theological. This separation at first liberated humanists from dogma and censorship, allowing for several centuries of profound thought and beautiful writing about the human condition and its possible flourishing. But the direction of humanistic learning in my lifetime—culminating in a cynical tendency to disparage the great ideas and to deconstruct the great works that we have inherited from ages past—invites this question: Can the humanities preserve their true dignity and answer their true calling if they close off or ignore questions of ultimate concern: the character and source of the cosmic whole and the place and work of the human being within it? Can we humanists complete our search for the human being without lifting our gaze, without looking beyond what human beings alone have wrought, to consider the powers not of our making that are the condition of the possibility of both the world and our special place within it?

What, then, summing up, can this unlicensed humanist say about his search for the human being? As with Diogenes, the quest continues, though the progress I have made makes cynicism even more unjustified. True, the hunt has not captured the quarry, in the sense that I have not found an answer, neatly formulated, sprawling on a pin, an improved substitute for “animal, biped and featherless.” Instead, I have acquired a deeper understanding of the question itself and of the hidden depths of its object. I am much more mindful of what a full account of our humanity would entail, including attention to the larger whole—communal, natural, and beyond—in which we human beings are imbedded and only in relation to which can we gain any fully flourishing humanity. I have had the privilege of living with the humanizing gifts of the great books—and the Good Book—open free of charge to every one of us, regardless of race, class, or gender. In the company of poets and playwrights, philosophers and prophets, novelists and naturalists—deeper human beings all—I have enlarged my vision, furnished my imagination, and deepened my awareness, well beyond what I had reason to expect from books. Grappling with real life concerns—from cloning to courtship, from living authentically to dying with dignity—has made me a better reader. Reciprocally, reading in a wisdom-seeking spirit has helped me greatly in my wordly grapplings. Not being held to the usual dues expected of a licensed humanist—professing specialized knowledge or publishing learned papers—I have been able to wander freely and most profitably in all the humanistic fields. I have come to believe that looking honestly for the human being, following the path wherever it leads, may itself be an integral part of finding it. A real question, graced by a long life to pursue it among the great books, has been an unadulterated blessing.

But the real key to my flourishing has been the living human company I have enjoyed on my journey. For unlike Diogenes, I have neither needed nor wanted to travel alone. I have been blessed with wonderful teachers and colleagues, especially at the University of Chicago, St. John's College, and the American Enterprise Institute, from whose speeches and thoughts

in friendly conversation I have learned enormous amounts. I have been blessed with generous support from numerous benefactors, including the National Endowment for the Humanities. I have been blessed with practical opportunities to put my learning in the service of confronting the profound ethical dilemmas of our biotechnological age, and I am especially grateful to President Bush for the privilege of leading wonderful colleagues on the President's Council on Bioethics in exploring and defending what is humanly at stake in our emerging brave new world. I have been supremely blessed in Amy, beloved soul mate and life-long partner, co-author and co-teacher—a *real* humanist, she—from whose literary studies, teaching collaborations, support, criticism, and encouragement I have benefited more than words can say.

Finally, I have been blessed in my students these past 37 years, first at St. John's College, mainly at Chicago, in the College and the Committee on Social Thought. Serious, thoughtful, smart, eager, engaged, and generous young people have been my most reliable companions in all phases of my journey of inquiry. Most young people in my experience still want to be taken seriously. Despite their facile sophistication and easy-going cynicism—more often than not, largely a defense against disappointment—most of them are in fact looking for a meaningful life or listening for a summons. Many of them are self-consciously looking for their own humanity and for a personal answer to Diogenes' question. If we treat them uncynically and respectfully, as people interested in the good, the true and the beautiful, and if we read books with them in search of the true, the good, and the beautiful, they invariably rise to the occasion, vindicating our trust in their possibilities. And they more than repay our efforts by contributing to our quest their own remarkable insights and discoveries.

The search for our humanity, always necessary yet *never more urgent*, is best illuminated by the treasured works of the humanities, read in the company of open minds and youthful hearts seeking wisdom about how to live a worthy human life. To keep *this* lantern lit, to keep alive *this* quest: Is there a more important calling for those of us who would practice the humanities, with or without a license?

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