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THE RETURN OF THE PROPHET: A DIALOGUE

THE FOLLOWING DIALOGUE derives from a graduate seminar that took place towards the end of a course on 'The Return of the Religious' at the University of Nottingham in the autumn of 2003. A description of the context is in order: for preceding classes we had read and discussed a number of relevant texts, traces of which are in evidence here. Søren Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, four essays from Martin Heidegger's *Basic Writings*, Emmanuel Levinas' *Otherwise than Being*, Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, Gilles Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Michel Henri's *I am the Truth*, Gianni Vattimo's *After Christianity*, and John Milbank's *Being Reconciled* were the prescribed texts, and some of the students also read my *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety*.

The class became enthused by the idea that truth may be considered in temporal and relational terms as a process, event or experience, rather than as an immutable being subject to the mastery of thought. They started experimenting with the production of living thought in the event of the seminar itself, rather than through repetition or criticism of the ideas, opinions and concepts of the master-thinkers. Some of them developed a discipline of working with the thought presented by each other, so as to create a process, event or experience. Others attempted to produce a similar result by discontinuous interruptions.

For this particular seminar, I asked them to prepare by returning to a problem posed at the beginning of the course by Johannes Climacus: 'Can the truth be learned?' The fact that the focus of the seminar changed so quickly was felt by some to demonstrate an affirmative answer to this problem. Others felt that their peers had only learned to repeat ideas from my own work. One even suggested that the entire seminar and all the students were fantastic products of my own imagination, partly on the grounds that I have used pseudonyms to report their conversation. Of course, I replied by suggesting that perhaps it is I who am the product of their collective imagination, on the grounds of the fantastic nature of my own name.

While it is unusual to publish such a seminar, I think that many readers will find much that is thought-provoking here. My hope is not that it will argue a case, but that it will precipitate events of thought, or even inspire a vision.

RICHARD CRUDGINGTON: I'd like to begin at the end, with the words of Emmanuel Levinas: "Truth is something promised. Always promised, always future, always loved, truth lies in the promise and love of wisdom ..."¹

FIONA CRANNY: With this end promised, you've promised us no end or truth.

SANDRA BURNUP: I have a vision of the end which comes from a near-death experience: on leaving my body, I became acutely aware of the thoughts, anxieties and grief of those who surrounded me. I tried to cry out to reassure them, that everything was fine, but they could not hear me. But everything was fine – even their pain, anguish and grief was as it should be.

And, suddenly, I was whisked away and found myself traveling rapidly through a vortex toward a beautiful white light in the far, far distance. I began to experience an overwhelming feeling of love within me and around me. There was no fear, no anxiety, no worry. I even felt as if I'd done this before and was remembering that I was going home. I was filled with joy

The closer I got to the light, the more love and ecstasy surrounded me. Suddenly, I entered into the light: at that instant, total knowledge of reality appeared to me and I understood the infinite meaning concealed within a tiny fraction of the universe. I was in a single instant what my life had been and what had been of meaning in my life. The superficial aspects of my life, what I had accomplished, owned and known, were consumed by the energy of that light; what I had been became simply those acts where I had selflessly expressed love.

Then my consciousness expanded so far beyond the physical plane that I was no longer aware of it, nor of my self. I was so much a part of it all, there was no distinction. I understood that all was well – these words, implicit in all faith, how weak they now sound! – all was marvelously and super-abundantly well, and that the universe is so ordered that all things work together for the good of each and all, and that infinite bliss for all is absolutely certain.

Then gradually I began to sense that I had to return. I wanted to die to eternity to be reborn as myself. I wanted to leave the bliss that I can never leave, that eternally recurs, and to which I shall return, so

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 29.

as to live. Leaving eternity was like a crucifixion that I had chosen for myself. I heard the calling of actual events; I heard events as announcements that would constitute my very being. An apocalyptic vision of a timetable of history started to take shape before my eyes. Then I woke up ... or did I fall asleep to reality and enter the neurotic nightmare of actual life?²

CRANNY: This sounds a cruel promise: in this vision of the Good, there is no evil or death. It's the same with all heavenly or ethical expectations – all turned towards the Good will live in perpetual peace. But with no suffering or strife, there is little purpose in life. Beyond good and evil, all is created good. Whatever is, is right.

Now, whatever the truth of this vision, to live as though this vision is true is to live without need or purpose. There is nothing, not even the Good, that needs to be done.

TOM EAGLE: It's not only a matter of belief, but also one of aspiration: to even try to make the vision of perpetual peace come true is to aim at the redundancy of doing of the Good. Beyond good and evil, the one who lives the vision of the Good knows without feeling the miseries of life.

The saints are cruel. As St Augustine says: "Yet the power of knowledge will be so great in the saints that they will be aware not only of their own past suffering, but also of the everlasting misery of the damned. For if they were not to know that they had been miserable, how could they, as the psalm says, for ever sing the mercies of God?"³

CRANNY: If faith means to act as though a vision of the Good is promised, how can one escape the cruelty of unfeeling knowledge? Perhaps we need to change our question: if the Truth or the Good are simply promised, how, then, may the Good be done?

DAVID DANDY (*announces*): 1526: The Copernican Revolution: in his Treatise on Debasement, Nicolaus Copernicus argues that it is the total amount of currency in circulation, and not its intrinsic value or metal content, that determines the level of prices and the buying power of currency.

² One may suspect that this is a fictional, composite, partially plagiarized account, based on reading a number of different first-hand reports. I have encountered some of these words previously in publications and websites.

³ Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. & trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Book XXII, Chapter 30, 1181.

Money has become a mere token of value.

Symbols of the Good become deterritorialized from goods.

Relations become external to their terms.

And it is by means of an individual relation to the Good, rather than to particular goods, that the Good may be done.

EAGLE: But what have you said? When you invoke the Good, how can you be sure that the Good itself answers to your call? When you invoke the Good, how may you know that you are not met by an impostor?

CRANNY: If I call an impostor the Good, the disguise of whatever answers my call will no doubt be secure. If I call an impostor the Good, the impostor will decide what is to count as good – and all that does not serve its interests, even the Good itself, will no longer count at all.

EAGLE: When you say ‘the Good’, the only good in your saying is what you have put there.

CRUDGINGTON: Not entirely, for when I say ‘the Good’, I proceed in the faith that the Good will hear my prayer.

BURNUP: I await that glorious future when the meaning of ‘the Good’ will become clear.

CRUDGINGTON: I await that mutual understanding where its sense is universal and repeatable.

BURNUP: I await that final moment when we will all say the same.

EAGLE: But when you credit the promise of the Good, what has actually been given?

CRANNY: When I invoke the Good, a surplus value has been abstracted from living cycles of material interchange.

CRUDGINGTON: But not only that, for when I invoke the Good, I receive a symbolic gift.

BURNUP: Yes, when I call a symbol the Good, a perspective is given through which I may count what is good.

CRANNY: So when I call a symbol the Good, I cover the living world of

material interchange with a fabricated world of symbolic exchange.

EAGLE: In order to propose the Good, you have to treat the universal as though it were already given.

CRANNY: Or else in order to propose the Good, I have to treat the particular proposition as though it represented the universal.

CRUDGINGTON: I am given a symbolic promise of the Good that can bear any value or desire.

BURNUP: I am given a symbol of the Good through which all good is counted.

CRUDGINGTON: I am given a supreme good: the symbol of the Good through which all good may be known.

EAGLE: But when you count the symbol as the supreme good, what has been done?

CHARLOTTE MERRIMAN: Life and the living have been excluded from thought.

CRANNY: For the living cycle has been substituted a linear accumulation of symbolic capital.

CRUDGINGTON: But it's not really a cycle or linear. In order to do the good, I must borrow the Good from the future.

BURNUP: In order to do the good, I must strive to show that my deeds will prove to be good.

EAGLE: Yet your deeds will only count as good if someone else counts them as good.

CRUDGINGTON: My deeds will only count as good if someone else borrows the Good from the future.

CRANNY: In order to count the Good, we become indebted to proving our good is universal.

EAGLE: In order to count the Good, we become enslaved to a will to power.

CRANNY: In order to count the Good, we lose all possibility of doing the Good.

DANDY (*announces*): 1694: Founding of the Bank of England: secure paper

currency supplements coinage.

Value becomes a promise – guaranteed by future taxation, and thus underwritten by debt.

Value is created by fiat.

The increase of currency in circulation as debt is not inflationary since it is tied to increased production and future repayment.

Society is reorganized around production for the sake of profit.

Financial value becomes the universal good.

God is superseded by the technological advances of capitalism, is made redundant, and begins to die.

CRANNY: Let us return to an ethical question: how may the Good be done?

EAGLE: If you say the Good, then what you say is not good.

But perhaps when you say the Good, you may be given a particular good.

CRANNY: If I proclaim my vision of the Good, I am forever enslaved to serving this vision.

But perhaps when I am presented with particular goods, the Good may still be done?

EAGLE: For religious visions of an eternal Good I may substitute technical problems of finite goods.

CRANNY: Forbearing agreement on the universal Good, I may at least substitute particular goods.

EAGLE: For agreement on a universal morality I may substitute a global economy.

CRANNY: For need and suffering most urgently demand the production of goods and services.

EAGLE: That the Good may be done belongs to secular political economy.

CRANNY: I may lose a religious vision of the future to gain a secular present

of finite goods.

DANDY (*announces*): 1971: Nixon takes the dollar off the gold standard. All currencies float freely.

Symbols of universal value are replaced by particular rates of return. Levels of private debt increase exponentially.

Deterritorialization of capital from metaphysics.

Liberation of investing, spending and consuming subject from constraints of knowledge or universal value.

The particular substitutes for the universal.

Consummation of nihilism.

Religious value begins to return:

- ❖ as moralizing discourse that compensates for lack of universal values;
- ❖ as infinite debt or responsibility;
- ❖ and as particular claims that compete to embody universal value.

BURNUP: But the situation is no better: this present steals my goodness from me. If I am given a finite good, then counting it good is demanded of me. Economic rationality knows no evil: all is accounted positively as a measure of wealth.

Beyond moral distinctions of good and evil, there is no higher good than the production of goods. Morality has become discredited by purely technical measures of activity.

CRUDGINGTON: The promise of a wealthier future devalues all existing values; it calls into being the productive activity that strives to make the promise come true.

BURNUP: Indeed, prophecy constitutes the secular sphere itself: a present age that is redeemed from its obligation to repeat the past, as well as liberated from the judgments of the future.

CRUDGINGTON: In the secular utopia, the blessings of property substitute for the constraints of natural necessity.

BURNUP: In the secular utopia; the opportunities of liberty substitute for the

constraints of social responsibility.

CRUDGINGTON: Once redeemed from needs and liberated from suffering, one may become in the present what one wishes to be.

CRANNY: Economic rationality guarantees its goods by means of returns: returning a profit, creating wealth, increasing circulation, repetitive production, repeatable experiments - in a global economy, returning is the being of becoming, the measure of certainty, evidence of the good.

EAGLE: One lends credit to the good on the basis of expected returns.

BURNUP: To realize the secular prophecy, one must step forward in faith and treat the secular age as though it were already present, here and now.

CRANNY: One undertakes the liability to ensure returns are secure.

EAGLE: The certainty that attaches to the secular vision depends on the production of a material guarantee.

BURNUP: But given finite property, liberty and certainty, our credit must be forever repeated.

CRUDGINGTON: So in the projection of a glorious future, an intensified liability returns.

BURNUP: The secular prophecy of a glorious heavenly future, where the passage of time is no longer constrained by natural necessity or social responsibility, speaks of an age without vision or morality.

CRANNY: With perfect repeatability and universality, all knowledge will become certainty.

EAGLE: All nature will become property.

CRANNY: And all freedom will become mastery.

BURNUP: Yet giving credit to such a prophecy, the world incurs a notable liability.

CRUDGINGTON: Such promises are not without their threats; the rewards of wealth are not without their punishments of poverty.

BURNUP: One cannot return a profit without returning a prophet.

CRUDGINGTON: Yes, for beyond distinctions of good and evil, a moralizing discourse returns. If there is no higher interest than compound interest, then those who impede the return of profits do so against their own interests. In the interests of interest, barriers to interest must be removed – barriers of ecological cycles, moral norms, laws, states and peoples.

BURNUP: All life must be sacrificed to the utopian vision of wealth, for the utopian vision of wealth has become the source of all property, all liberty and all life.

CRUDGINGTON: Making a contract with an infinite vision one becomes liable for all its demands.

CRANNY: One serves a vision of a glorious future, when all finite goods are known by the greater Good.

EAGLE: One serves a self-fulfilling prophecy, of repeatability and universality, where the Good is actualized in being, and all differences are reconciled.

MERRIMAN: One serves the symbol that conquers over matter, until life and the living are no more.

BURNUP: And in this secular age of present and finite goods, the voice of a prophet has never ceased to call.

DANDY (*announces*): 2015ish: oil and gas production peak:

- ❖ promises of future value become unbelievable;
- ❖ widespread defaulting on debts;
- ❖ global economic collapse;
- ❖ shortages of fresh water, food and energy;
- ❖ wars;
- ❖ rumors of wars;
- ❖ migrations;
- ❖ abrupt climate change.

Highest values are devalued.

Return of the prophet.

PHILIP GOODCHILD: Let me try to summarize what I take to be the implications of what you have said. By starting with the suggestion of truth as promised, you have begun to explore a future, or indeed, an eschatological ontology. This is a possibility quite different from

modern, critical or historical notions of truth as process or becoming. Instead, truth would be a kind of apocalyptic vision that guides or calls our thinking towards itself. We are not yet fully constituted and determined; in the same way that a traumatic past is only constituted as such in relation to a present, our somewhat traumatic present only gains meaning, only takes on the richness of a significant experience, in relation to a vision of the future. And the particular future will determine what the present will mean. What is interesting about such a vision is that it is not simply a passive object of thought, one that might be true or false, but an active power, a potency or experience, where truth, the Good, and a state of awareness or experience that comprehends them are reunified. If truth is a potency, then we are determined to a large extent by our particular eschatological vision.

You have then proceeded with a critical discussion of two such eschatological visions: a religious vision of heavenly perfection in the after-life, and secular vision of material prosperity. In both cases there are differences between what they say, what they give, and what they do. In both cases, they point to an extraordinarily thin quality of experience: an eternity that knows without feeling the miseries of life, where there is no longer any possibility of ethical action because there is no need or suffering; and a secular present that cannot stop for ethical concerns because it has to prioritize the creation of symbols of wealth, symbols of knowledge, symbols of the Good, above actual life. Each clearly leads to an inadequate account of experience, if not an actual destruction of experience. What interests me is not merely the question of whether such visions have been widely present in our history, but whether they have actually determined the course of that history. Of course, historical determination is a very difficult matter to discuss, and involves so many different heterogeneous factors that one questions whether 'priority' among them is at all meaningful. But such visions can add a depth, an intensity, and an urgency to experience in the present that may select between contingent possibilities.

The implication of all this is that you cannot simply choose a preferred vision – and this is why possible futures may determine us, and constitute our very experience, even our very being. Visions captivate us, and we become subservient to them. We attempt to realize them as self-fulfilling prophecies, as though they were produced by our agency, but they only become prophecies by captivating us. In that respect, we are in a state of bondage to our visions, and if the actual consequences of our visions are undesirable, then we require some kind of redemption. We cannot save ourselves;

we require a prophet who will announce a different vision of the future.

MERRIMAN: Thus mortgaged to the future, pledged as far as death, in infinite debt, despairing of doing the Good, we cry out for redemption.

At this point the seminar was interrupted by another member of the course who arrived late, although he may have been eavesdropping on some of the preceding conversation. This particular student had become so obsessed by Nietzsche's Zarathustra that he would only speak in direct quotations from the text. When quoting, however, he had a habit of misquoting, or deliberately modifying the text – whether consciously or unconsciously, I could not tell. To the extraordinary credit of the other members of the group, they received the contributions of their 'prophet' in the same spirit as those of each other: as opportunities to create further events of thought. They credited his announcements with the possibility of being true, or at least the possibility of calling them towards true thinking.

MICHAEL COCKSWORTH:

I walk among men as among fragments of the future, of that future which I scan. And it is all my art and aim to forgive what is debt and call into being what may still be created.

To redeem the future and to transform every liability into 'It can be otherwise!' – that alone do I call redemption!⁴

BURNUP: This is fascinating. I think I sense the shadow of a divine illumination. What is this created good, of which the prophet speaks?

EAGLE: This prophet brings no presents, no guarantees, no certainty.

CRANNY: This prophet bears witness to no anteriority, no foundations, no responsibility.

EAGLE: This prophet makes no promise, speaks no prediction, undertakes no liability.

CRUDGINGTON: This prophet merely evokes opportunity and possibility.

COCKSWORTH:

⁴ A modification of Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1969), "Of Redemption," 161.

All names of good and evil are images: they do not speak out, they only hint. He is a fool who seeks knowledge from them.

Whenever your spirit wants to speak in images, pay heed; for that is when your virtue has its origin and beginning.

When your heart surges broad and full like a river, a blessing and a danger to those who live nearby: that is when your virtue has its origin and beginning.⁵

EAGLE: All images of good and evil are both a blessing and a danger. Like worship which affirms a vision of the Good, they evoke bliss for the One, the Universal, or the Individual. But the One excludes the many, the Universal excludes the actual, and the Individual excludes the other. Hence the saints are also cruel. When images of good and evil return to evaluate themselves, good may be seen as evil in the confusion of a reflected interiority. For the image, unlike the prophet, does not speak out.

CRUDGINGTON: Yet virtue has its origin and beginning when the spirit wants to speak in images, including images of good and evil. At the origin of values lies a different evaluation: differences of evaluation are good; differences of evaluation belong to the Good. We do the Good by producing different evaluations. The Good would have no life, no meaning, no potency if it were not able to differentiate and actualize itself. So we can't stay with the Good, or live in a heavenly vision. To do the Good is to return from the Good. Once we have returned, the Good may seem cruel from our different evaluative perspective; but perhaps this difference in evaluation is itself good.

BURNUP: And behind images of good and evil, the prophet, whose heart surges broad like a river, evokes a response in the surging of life. The call of the prophet is a call to life.

EAGLE: But what is life? What does it say, give, or do?

COCKSWORTH:

Behold, I teach you life is suffering.

Suffering is the meaning of the past. Let your heart say: suffering shall be the meaning of the past!

I entreat you, my friend, remain true to the past, and do not believe

⁵ Zarathustra, "Of the Bestowing Virtue," 101

*those who speak to you of future hopes! They are poisoners, whether they know it or not.*⁶

CRANNY: To remain true to the past is no longer to remain true to the One, the Universal, or the Individual. It is good and evil that have condemned suffering. It is good and evil that resent the past. It is good and evil that are not true to the past.

EAGLE: What, then? Are we to affirm suffering? Are we to will the return of the past?

CRUDGINGTON: But to will the return of the suffering of the past is no longer to remain true to the pastness of the past. To will return is to want the past to be present; it is an attempt to encompass all within the secular totality of the will. For the will exerts its sovereignty over the moment; the will finds no meaning in the suffering of the past and wishes to give it a meaning in the return of the moment. The will is merely the affirmation of the moment; it wills its own knowledge and enjoyment of differences of evaluation. But willing does not liberate; willing is not the origin; the past need not be overcome. It is useless to seek the father at the birth of the child. For the past has already bears a meaning if life suffers. All life is labor, birth, creation.

COCKSWORTH:

*If you believed more in life, you would devote yourselves less to the moment.*⁷

CRANNY: The event is the moment. Does the event bear a meaning?

EAGLE: What does it mean to remain true to the past?

CRANNY: If it is not a matter of will, is it merely a matter of memory?

EAGLE: If the past remains past, can its meaning still return?

CRUDGINGTON: But what is the meaning of the past: a set of hints and images, or a heart surging broad and full like a river?

BURNUP: Is meaning a timeless present, or is meaning the presenting of time?

CRANNY: Perhaps the anteriority of the past is its ending, its distance and inaccessibility, an end to suffering that clears an opening for the

⁶ A modification of *Zarathustra*, "Zarathustra's Prologue," 42.

⁷ *Zarathustra* "Of the Preachers of Death," 73.

present.

CRUDGINGTON: But if the past is what is over, how can one think the truth of what is past, since it stands at a distance from the clearing of the present?

BURNUP: But if the meaning of the past is suffering, then the past surges broad and full like a river, sweeping along without pity all wills and moments in the passage of time. When the meaning of the past surges, it constitutes a destiny.

EAGLE: What, then, leads to the surging forth of life?

BURNUP: Time is nothing but the surging of events, the return of their meaning, the constitution of a destiny. Time is itself meaning. The past is not distant from the present: the past stands to the present as its deepest interiority. To remain true to the past is not to judge it according to images of good and evil in the present; it is not to affirm it from the perspective of a will in the present; it is not to overcome it with the projection of speculative destiny; it is not to know it according to the metaphysics of the moment. It is to know it according to the metaphysics of the actual events in the past; it is to know it according to its surging forth of meaning. It is to know the past according to the meaning of the past. It is to suffer its meaning.

CRUDGINGTON: So the meaning of the past is suffering. Here there is a difference of evaluation in the origin: the past cruelly affirms suffering, for without suffering there is no meaning; and the meaning of suffering is that life protests against the past. Divided in its origin, expressing a difference in evaluation, the past surges forth in time.

CRANNY: Can we return to the ethical question: how may the Good be done?

COCKSWORTH:

*But mark too this saying: All great love is above pity: for it wants –
to create what is loved!*⁸

*Let your love towards life be love towards your highest hope: and let
your highest hope be the highest idea of life!*

But you should let me commend to you your highest idea – and it is:

⁸ Zarathustra, "Of the Compassionate," 114.

*Humanity is something that should be redeemed.*⁹

CRANNY: I don't believe that pity is the Good, for pity is not true to the past. Whether the past is affirmed or condemned, the past is overlaid with a symbolic judgment as a passive victim of the will. Yet the will achieves a mere symbolic mastery of the past, a past that returns when repressed. The meaning of the past escapes all meaning proposed in the present, for symbols of the present are not rich enough to contain the meaning of the past. The will has mastery only over a symbolic, utopian present, and pity is an expression of the weakness of this will. The past is not an object of the will; but the past indeed creates a will in the present – a will that may be turned in the present by the future towards which it hopes.

CRUDGINGTON: One is thrown into a destiny not only by the past, for one's destiny is constrained by the future for which one hopes. Yet the will achieves a mere symbolic mastery of the future, a future that returns when repressed. The meaning of the future escapes all meaning proposed in the present, for the symbols of the present are not rich enough to contain the meaning of the future. The will has mastery only over a symbolic, utopian present, and destiny is an expression of the weakness of this will. The future is not an object of the will; but the future indeed creates a will in the present – a destiny that may be turned in the present by the future towards which it hopes.

BURNUP: So it seems to me that what is worthy of love, attention and devotion is not the past or the present but the highest future for which one hopes. Not the symbol of the future but the destiny of the future – a destiny which returns to redeem one's hopes from futures that are not the highest.

CRUDGINGTON: Yes, and perhaps the prophet is the one who foresees destinies – the destiny that belongs to each hope. Redemption is the turning from lower a destiny to a higher destiny; the prophet calls us to a higher hope. The future contains a difference in evaluations; and the Good is the turning towards the future's highest hope.

EAGLE: What, then? Are we to affirm the vision of the Good? Are we to will the return of the future?

CRUDGINGTON: But to will the return of the vision of the Good is no longer to remain true to the futurity of the future. To will return is to want the future to be present; it is an attempt to encompass all within the secular totality of the will. For the will exerts its sovereignty over the

⁹ A modification of *Zarathustra*, "War and Warriors," 75.

moment; the will finds no meaning in the vision of the Good and wishes to give it a meaning in the return of the moment.

COCKSWORTH:

You want to create the world before which you can kneel: this is your ultimate hope and intoxication.

And life itself told me this secret: 'Behold,' it said, 'I am that which redeems itself again and again.'

The living creature values many things higher than life itself: yet out of this evaluation itself speaks – will to redemption.¹⁰

CRUDGINGTON: Perhaps to live is to credit, to venture forth; it is to enter a destiny, a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Good must not only be hoped for but be done.

CRANNY: Yet our deeds are in need of perpetual redemption, turning from their destiny to the Good. To credit must be added a critique of our destiny, a turning from where it leads towards the Good.

BURNUP: The critic values many things more than life, for life is when one's heart surges broad and full like a river, carrying one to a destiny one knows not where. Life itself is a critic: it affirms neither the present nor the past, but surges forth to the future. In its surging there is longing to turn again and again, for life itself is not the Good, and life turns from itself, and this turning is a longing for redemption. But the critic does not negate, for if life turns to nothing, then it no longer remains true to its destiny.

EAGLE: So perhaps to credit destines one to turn to critique, for credit without critique is incredible.

CRUDGINGTON: But to critique, in turn, destines one to create, for prophecy calls one to create a destiny for oneself. For the Good cannot be done without a prophecy that calls one to credit, critique and creation. To venture forth in credit requires a destiny that one must create to serve as a guarantee of ventures.

EAGLE: But who takes liability for ensuring a destiny, a destiny of turning and redemption? The prophet gives no guarantee of being a true reader of destiny.

¹⁰ A modification of *Zarathustra*, "Of Self-Overcoming," 136-8.

BURNUP: The prophet gives no present, no material guarantee. The prophet merely calls to life.

CRANNY: Can we return once more to the ethical question: how may the Good be done?

The 'prophet' had by this time left the room. The repetition and intensification of the ethical question was rather challenging. There followed a long pause.

EAGLE: Well it seems to me that the guarantee of destiny is political economy. For religious visions of a destined Good I may substitute technical problems of finite goods. Forbearing evidence of a destined Good, I may at least substitute particular goods. For absence of a redemptive strategy I may substitute a global economy. For the opportunity of redemption most urgently requires the creation of goods and services.

BURNUP: But this actually is the secret of redemption: one only has to behave as though the vision of the Good is true and treat all creation as opportunity for redemption, and then one will find one's destiny has changed insofar as others also treat the vision as true, and stand liable for its creation. It is all a matter of collective credit. While the vision offers no guarantee as to its destiny, one only has to undertake the collective liability to shape a destiny, and the destiny is created as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Good is achieved through returns.

CRANNY: All return is cruelty: from the vision of the Good, and from affirmation of the Good in its difference, the prophet returns to affirm the difference that is done. All return is cruelty, all return is incarnation unto death, all return faces suffering and liability.

CRUDGINGTON: The prophet returns to create meaning in the world – that is, to undergo suffering, to undertake liability. Destined by a vision of the Good, we give our bodies for each other, and thus we all consume each other, we profit from each other's property and liberty. Our life, meaning and destiny is constituted by the suffering of each other, by each return from bliss. Then the saints are not distinguished by the presence or lack of cruelty – we all profit from the suffering of others. Of course the saints do not will or produce suffering for others, for suffering is the past – and to multiply suffering is to destroy meaning and value. To redeem suffering is to create a new destiny; to remain true to suffering is to leave it in the past, while allowing it to return in the surging forth of time.

BURNUP: So return is nothing but the surging of events, the creation of their meaning, the constitution of a destiny. Return is itself meaning. The future is not distant from the present: the future stands to the present as its deepest interiority. To redeem the future is not to judge it according to images of good and evil in the present; it is not to affirm it from the perspective of a will in the present; it is not to overcome it with the projection of speculative destiny; it is not to know it according to the metaphysics of the moment. It is to know it according to the metaphysics of the possible events in the future; it is to know it according to its surging forth of meaning. It is to know the future according to the meaning of the future. It is to create its meaning.

EAGLE: All images of good and evil can then be falsified; texts that announce our destiny be modified, so that the destiny bequeathed to us may be redeemed. Such texts can then return from the past to become our future prophets.

BURNUP: From a secular utopia of property and liberty let us return to natural necessity and social responsibility in the spiritual hope that nothing is beyond redemption. For material goods and services let us substitute opportunities and possibilities. For the central problematic of political economy need no longer be the meeting of wants, needs and interests; it need no longer be the distribution of time. The problem of political economy is redemption from a destiny. For alongside material interchange are the bonds of social exchange, and alongside bonds of social exchange are the destinies of life. Political economy is the mutual interaction of destiny.

CRUDGINGTON: For the truth of life is found in credit, critique and creation: where each life may offer a prophetic call, each life may offer a turning, each life may offer liability for the creation of the Good. We become prophets to each other. Between the saying of the Good and the doing of the Good, the truth of the Good lies in its future and its destiny.

GOODCHILD: Well, perhaps I should draw us towards a conclusion by making a few remarks on the political economy of this group. Of course, we have not been exchanging goods and services, but we have been exchanging thoughts and ideas. And while these seem to be offered freely, rather than for money, there has been the implicit issue of the currency of ideas, their acceptability, their capacity to continue to circulate. Since nothing has been demonstrated here, all circulation has rested on credit: you have trusted that certain ideas are worth thinking through. By this extension of your trust, your time, and

your attention, you have each made yourselves liable for proving the worth of each other's thoughts. But circulation has not taken place without transformation: each thought, if repeated, is repeated differently. And credit has not excluded critique: each of you has striven to find a richer experience of thinking through the thoughts suggested by each other. The consequence of this collective work does seem to me to have been creative.

Now, I would like you to continue to reflect after our meeting on whether the seminar has 'worked', that is, whether there have been any events or experiences of thinking here. Have we remained where we are? Have you come to a new place? Have you acquired any new vision? Indeed, has there been a vision that has actually determined the course of our discussion?

For it seems to me that we have distinguished three modes of the future. In the first place there is the anticipated future – and whether this is believed in as real or not, it may still shape our behavior. In the second place, there are the actual tendencies of our present conduct, which, although shaped by our anticipations, actually bring us a future in no way identical to our expectations. Both of these ways of conceiving the future treat it as something distant, something clearly distinct from the present, and something related to it extrinsically through anticipation and causation. But you have also suggested that there is a third mode of futurity, one that is not separate from us, but surges to meet us, or 'returns' to us in a way analogous to the return of the past in trauma. This surging might be encountered in an inner quality of experience or state of awareness. It might also be encountered in the call of a prophet – one who returns from a heightened state of awareness in the hope of drawing us towards it. Such a return of the future might be grace, redemption, desire.

Now, in order to address such a future, I need to return from what you have said to examine what has been done, and ask what has been given. Have any of you heard the call of a prophet? Has there been any grace or redemption? Has it affected the currency of 'truth' among you, so that the thoughts that you have circulated most often have been those that bear the most promise? What kind of truth might be promised?

MERRIMAN: What a load of neurotic, ascetic drivel! What do I care about all these prophets and remote futures? We're all going to die anyway, so why attempt to prevent the inevitable? Redemption happens in life, before death: it is a liberation of desire. Thinking is a set of erotic practices, and, to be quite frank, your conversation turns me off. All

this stepping gently around each other, these timid credits and criticisms, this futile foreplay that laments the impossibility of any gratification. Never mind your prophets and profits, I want to hear your passion, I want to experience your intensity, I want to feel your skin and your heat through the words that you say. Truth is the orgasm; the orgasm is truth. If we were really to touch each other through our words, we would be giving and receiving each other's desire. That would be true creation, true experience, true redemption – have you never had an orgasm through talking to others? There are only sensations and affects. There is no past or future. Life is itself emotion, sensation, value and meaning. Never mind reaching experience as some future goal, what are you experiencing right now? Are you experiencing anything at all?

CRUDGINGTON: I'd like to end at the beginning, with the words of Emmanuel Levinas:

Truth is something promised. Always promised, always future, always loved, truth lies in the promise and love of wisdom ...

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