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## When We Leave Our Desks

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### 1.

Baccalaureate speakers usually tell the new graduates about the glorious life waiting for them when they leave school. At Earlham, however, baccalaureate speakers are always academics. And for academics the glorious life *is* the academic life in which you never leave school. I know that tastes differ on this; but you know where *I* stand. I'll try to make you feel good about graduation anyway.

So I will not talk to you about the glorious academic life. Instead I've searched for all that can be said for leaving higher education forever, and I want to share my results with you.

One advantage of leaving higher education forever is that today you can say, "*Huzzah, I'll never have to take another exam in my life!*" On the other hand, one advantage of continuing in school is that you can say this again one day.

Another advantage of leaving, clearly, is to earn a little money, since you won't do better than that as an academic. Money is not dirty, either; it can help you achieve your social and political goals. Look at Ross Perot. For the rest of us, Dave Barry offers this advice:

You can't do good unto others unless you feel good about yourself, and you can't feel good about yourself unless you have a lot of neat stuff.[\[Note 1\]](#)

A third advantage of leaving school forever is that you'll never again be held to school standards or be treated like a student. I don't know this from personal experience, of course, but I can read. In this case I found the proof on Dialog. In a full-text database of major newspapers, I found this story. Eleven city employees were caught cheating on the promotion exam for senior posts in their particular branch of city government. No disciplinary action was taken against them, according to a city official, because *they had never been instructed not to cheat*. —Where was this? It was the Los Angeles Police Department under Daryl Gates. The eleven were police officers; and the date was fourteen months before Rodney King was beaten.[\[Note 2\]](#)

### 2.

That's just the beginning. To introduce the other advantages of leaving school, I want to start with a story from Plato's *Meno*.[\[Note 3\]](#) Just as Socrates and Meno were about to undertake an inquiry into the nature of virtue, Meno asked Socrates why they should bother. Either we know the truth already, Meno reasoned, or we don't. If we do, then inquiry is superfluous; if we don't, then we don't know what we're looking for and wouldn't recognize it if we ever stumbled across it. Either way, Meno concluded, inquiry is pointless.[\[Note 4\]](#)

Socrates called this a trick argument but he picked one of Meno's options anyway, as if it were not a trick argument. Socrates picked the side holding that we *do* know all truth already. Now the main problem with this position is that it's obviously false. Clearly we are ignorant at least some of the time. —For example, if I were never ignorant, I'd be omniscient; but if I'm omniscient, I don't know it. No one ever told me.

Socrates' position would obviously be false if it denied human ignorance. Socrates knows this. Moreover, it is important to him to admit his own ignorance on many subjects. So he is careful not to deny our ignorance; he explains it as forgetfulness. We do know everything, but we have forgotten it. Inquiry is not pointless if it is conceived as recollection. If Socrates can carry out the re-interpretation of ignorance as forgetfulness, then his position is no longer obviously false.

The theory of recollection, as his theory has come to be called, has only one more implausible element left to address. It requires that the soul pre-exist the body, journey somewhere, and learn all truth, kind of like Mr. Spock without a ship or body. Apart from this, the theory is a strong answer to Meno's dilemma. First, it explains why inquiry is not pointless; inquiry is recollection. Second, it explains both what knowledge is and our ordinary ignorance of it.

I want to talk about this 'ordinary ignorance' of what we know, the phenomenon that Socrates tried to explain as forgetfulness. And I want to talk about whether inquiry is pointless. Because if inquiry is pointless, you may as well leave higher education forever.

Have you ever had the experience of studying hard for an exam, reaching a plateau of real mastery of some corner of some field, and then finding that mastery slipping away during the next few days or weeks? *Are you feeling it now?* Have you ever put in some good time on a paper, thinking you've made an excellent start, then taken a break for dinner, perhaps throwing in a movie or party or two, and then returned to the paper only to find it foreign, stilted, cold, dull, unintelligible, in short, utterly worthless? Don't answer these questions. My real question is: how do you explain this? If you call it forgetfulness, then score one for Socrates. If you think there is something more complicated at work here, then how would you begin to be more articulate about the experience? And how complicated *is* forgetting, after all? Remember that almost everything we forget we can also remember at another time. Let's call this fact the first ground of optimism. Forgetting does not exclude recollection. But still, is forgetting the best explanation of the experience of quickly fading mastery? Does the experience show that knowledge is attainable but not retainable? If so, does it show that inquiry is pointless?

In modern philosophy, Leibniz and Hegel, among others, have modernized Socrates' response to Meno, and purged the mythical elements from the theory of recollection. In fact, by removing the claim about the pre-existence of the soul they make it a powerful explanation of knowledge and ignorance. For them, consciousness contains all truth the way a set of premises contains conclusions. Truth is implicit in consciousness but must be unfolded, or made explicit — recollected — to be known.

Despite these refinements, the theory of recollection is not widely accepted. But while its critics have offered alternative theories of knowledge, they have generally failed to offer either an answer to Meno's dilemma or an explanation of our ordinary ignorance of what we know. I want to explore this neglected topic this morning.

By our ordinary ignorance of what we know I mean the evaporation that commonly occurs after finishing an exam or paper. I also mean the *inefficacy* of our knowledge. Too often we don't use what we know to interpret our experience. Consequently we're too often no better off than we were without that knowledge. Biologists, tax lawyers, and jazz saxophone players probably live lives much like those who lack these distinctive kinds of expertise. Philosophers are worse: not only do they live lives much like those who have never studied philosophy. Many, following Wittgenstein, *try* to live such lives, and think the only successful philosophy is the one that "leaves everything as it was" — as if, once contracted, philosophy were more like a disease to be cured than a discipline to be made useful.

The thoughts we think when we do our laundry, or talk to friends, lovers, and strangers, are undoubtedly different, but the variation has more to do with our culture, gender, age, and a hundred other variables, than our academic specialization. What was the point of our special training, then?

It seems that when we leave our desks we forget the insights and ideas that we were then convinced were true and important, and if they operate in our lives thereafter it is feebly or indirectly or intermittently or indiscernibly, as if through the moil of dim recollection.

The Greek word for truth is *aletheia*, which means non-forgetting.[\[Note 5\]](#) The root is *lethe*, which means forgetting or oblivion. The River Lethe was one of the five rivers of Hades. Souls on the way to Elysium passed through it, washing away their memories, hence their sorrows, as a condition of their new life. In spelling out his theory of recollection, Socrates used the myth of the River Lethe to explain the origin of our forgetfulness.[\[Note 6\]](#) He reversed the old myth, however, so that instead of having the soul cross the river after the body dies, he has it cross at the other end of life in order to be installed in a new body, omniscient but ignorant of its omniscience.

My question is whether ordinary ignorance is our fate even if we have taken pains to learn something true and important. Is leaving our desk, or coming out of a deep thought, or graduating from college, like passing through the River Lethe?

### 3.

Let me start with my field, philosophy. Let me call three witnesses from three centuries to testify, on the one hand, that philosophy teaches truth but, on the other hand, that we forget these truths when we leave our desks. If this has happened to you, then you're in good company.

René Descartes knew that his senses sometimes deceived him and that he had been taught some falsehoods by his teachers. I think we can all say this. Descartes inferred from this that his senses and teachers were fallible; hence, he did not know when he could trust them. The safest course, he concluded, was to doubt all his beliefs whatsoever, and rebuild a system of knowledge afterwards from scratch with nothing but well-proven ideas.

He faced many obstacles in carrying out his program of universal doubt. One obstacle not often noticed by scholars is that Descartes kept forgetting his doubts away from his desk. In his first *Meditation* he says,

It is not enough to have made these observations [about the doubtfulness of his old beliefs]; it is also necessary that I should take care to bear them in mind. For these customary and long-standing beliefs [that he has resolved to doubt] will frequently recur in my thoughts, my long and familiar acquaintance with them giving them the right to occupy my mind against my will *and almost to make themselves masters of my beliefs.*[\[Note 7\]](#)

A bit later he confesses that the program of universal doubt is endangered because

a certain laziness leads me insensibly into the normal paths of ordinary life.[\[Note 8\]](#)

For Descartes the victory of ordinary life was a defeat for philosophy. He refers with touching misery to 'the normal paths of ordinary life' as if they ran through the valley of darkness.

Reflection taught him that his doubts were justified. But the pressure of ordinary life caused him to forget his doubts, as if he had to pass through the River Lethe on the way out of his study.

In the next generation, one of Descartes' younger contemporaries made the same point more plainly.

The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake.[\[Note 9\]](#)

Have you heard this before? Have you forgotten it already? This is from Pascal's *Pensées*, which you read in Humanities I four years ago.

My next witness is David Hume of Scotland. He testified to the same phenomenon one century later.

There is a great difference betwixt such opinions as we form after a calm and profound reflection [at our desks], and such as we embrace by a kind of instinct or natural impulse....If these opinions become contrary [or opposed], 'tis not difficult to foresee which of them will have the advantage. As long as our attention is bent upon the subject, the philosophical and study'd principle may prevail; but the moment we relax our thoughts, nature will display herself.[\[Note 10\]](#)

Hume is more acute, or less ashamed, than Descartes, and never attributes the loss of philosophical conclusions to laziness. He attributes it to 'nature', here meaning human nature. We can think what we please at our desks, and may even be right and justified in the conclusions we reach there; but our nature forces us to forget them when we return to the wider world.

Hume is best known for exploding cherished ideas, such as the idea that all events have causes, the idea that the self is unified, and the idea that induction is a reliable form of inference. Nevertheless, he says that philosophers,

immediately upon leaving their closets, mingle with the rest of mankind in those exploded opinions[\[Note 11\]](#)

which they had such good reasons to doubt at their desks.

Hume's argument against induction is famous. Induction is the method of reasoning by which we know that the sun will come up tomorrow. The sun has always come up in the past. *There is a definite pattern there* which supports the conclusion that the sun will come up again tomorrow. Why do we trust the method of reasoning that observes patterns of this kind and extrapolates to the future? The only reason is experience; we have found it to be reliable. In other words, induction has always worked in the past. There is a definite pattern there which supports the conclusion that it will work in the future. In short, our belief in induction is grounded in induction. But this is viciously circular.

This is one of the great, simple, destructive arguments in the history of philosophy. Even if there is a flaw in it, philosophers and logicians are very far from consensus on what it is. But when Hume left his desk he trusted induction as much as the next person. I do too. I find Hume's argument careful and powerful, but extremely forgettable away from my desk. I think that all

humans are mortal. We only know that all humans are mortal because in the past all humans have died. Actually, only the dead ones have died, and we must use induction to conclude that the living ones will die too. But I *do* use induction for this, even though it lacks foundation. I think the sun will come up tomorrow. I think fire will burn tomorrow. I think I will forget the limits of induction tomorrow.

Early in the next century after Hume, our last witness, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, argued that the mind does not take its ideas passively from its environment. Instead the mind actively shapes its contents, in effect creating the world of which it is aware. In philosophy this view, and variations on its theme, are called idealism. Idealists deny that the things we see and touch exist independently of our process of knowing. Fichte offers many arguments for idealism and against its alternatives, which are usually called realism. Hence, he claims to know that idealism is true and realism false. But he forthrightly admits that, when acting, he forgets his idealism and becomes a realist. You'll understand what he means if you work yourself into an idealist frame of mind at your desk and then go do your laundry.

When Fichte tries to explain this kind of forgetfulness, he is closer to Hume than to Descartes. He says that we "are constrained to [realism or the denial of idealism] by our own nature." [\[Note 12\]](#)

Our 'nature' is the problem. Fortunately, idealism can explain our nature. We must be realists in action, idealists in philosophy. Idealism is true but forgotten in action, and this forgetting can be explained, but only by the self that philosophizes, not the self that acts.

These witnesses from the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries testify that the results of diligent, serious inquiries stay at our desk, like a non-circulating reference book. In the bustle and weariness of life, they are forgotten. This is the forgetting, the ordinary ignorance of what we know, that Socrates was so well-equipped to explain with the theory of recollection.

None of these philosophers says that *all* conclusions of inquiry stay at the desk. If that were true, more people would have noticed this phenomenon and studied it. Or perhaps fewer people would have bothered to study anything. The fact that *some* important conclusions survive in 'the normal paths of ordinary life' is very important. Let's call it the second ground of optimism. But just as important, *some* positions clearly do *not* survive the transition from the study to the laundromat. These tend to be the large and complex positions, and the subtle and counter-intuitive positions, the kinds of positions that most of us would call most true, at least when we are at our desks. Now don't say that the same thing doesn't happen in your field.

We don't have to conclude that inquiry is pointless. But we do have to take seriously Meno's contention that it is. The good news is that, if it is pointless, you're leaving college forever and won't have to do it again. The bad news would be that you may be entering a life of forgetfulness, a world in which you are ignorant of what you know.

#### 4.

If inquiry is pointless because when we leave our desks we forget what we've learned, then do we blame ourselves for forgetting or do we blame our ideas for being forgettable? It's tempting to say that all truths can be lived, so that if an insight, perspective, or paradigm stays at our desk, then it must be false or deficient in some other way. This is oversimple, however. Theory can always be put into practice in theory, but not in practice. Socrates blames the River Lethe, not the memories it washes away. Descartes, Pascal, Hume, and Fichte agree that the problem lies in



ourselves, perhaps in our nature, and not in the discoveries that we make at our desks. Call this Hume's Theorem.

It's depressing to think that our ideas are false or deficient. But if the problem lies in ourselves instead, following Hume's theorem, if we are permanently burdened, not with original sin, but with what we could call *original dullness*, then isn't that equally depressing?[\[Note 13\]](#) Maybe, maybe not.

It's easier to see the bright side if we stop calling this state of mind 'forgetfulness'. Edmund Husserl proposes the term 'natural standpoint' here. Husserl was devoted to extraordinarily conscientious descriptions of appearances as they appear; he called this task *phenomenology*. He thought that we typically overlook much that is presented to us in appearances because we have fixed ideas about what is there to be seen. If we could put those fixed ideas to one side, we could see the thing itself and learn truth. When we live by our fixed ideas and let them filter our experience, instead of putting them to one side, then we are living in the natural standpoint.[\[Note 14\]](#)

Husserl would explain the kind of forgetting that Descartes, Pascal, Hume, and Fichte testified to as a reversion to the natural standpoint. Fichte was saying, in effect, that realism was the natural standpoint, and idealism its correction from philosophy. Husserl himself reverted to the natural standpoint when he wasn't taking pains at his desk to observe things phenomenologically. The natural standpoint is, essentially, the vision of the world structured by all sorts of filters — psychological, biological, cultural, and theoretical. These filters equip us for success in almost every sphere of life except one, namely, unfiltered truth-seeking. Husserl was radical in claiming that, with due diligence and method, we can remove all these filters temporarily. By contrast with this bold thesis, he is not at all surprising when he says that we revert to the natural standpoint when we leave our desks.

For Husserl, one kind of filter that constitutes our experience in 'the normal paths of ordinary life' is *belief*. That is, what we believe affects what we perceive and conceive. And belief can be cultivated. This is important enough to call the third ground of optimism. It means that the natural standpoint can be educated. So even when we forget, or when careful thought is overtaken by the natural standpoint, the natural standpoint to which we return can be an advance on the natural standpoint from which we departed. It means that inquiry is not pointless.

Without committing ourselves to Husserl's phenomenology, we can say that his explanation of our ordinary ignorance is attractive. The natural standpoint is a rendering of Socratic forgetfulness that has considerably more articulate detail. But I have many questions about it. Is the natural standpoint just a congeries of attitudes, unified only in name, that must be disentangled before they help us understand anything? Can there be many natural standpoints? By what 'force' does the natural standpoint return, or impose itself, after we leave our desks?

Patricia Churchland and other researchers in cognitive science and artificial intelligence use the term 'folk psychology' to describe conventional beliefs about the mind.[\[Note 15\]](#) Folk psychology is to a true science of the mind what folklore about the weather is to meteorology. For these researchers, there are no faculties corresponding to the words *memory*, *reason*, or *imagination*, and no entities corresponding to the terms *belief*, *idea*, or *image*. Instead there are 100 billion neurons or so connected to one another in a wondrously complex network, exchanging bits of information in the form of electrical pulses. We don't have a full explanation of the mind at the neural level yet, but these researchers are sure that we can and will. When we do, we will finally have a natural science of the mind. Folk psychology is very weak by this

standard. Its chief strength is that its explanations are readily grasped, just as a story of Olympian intrigue is more readily grasped as an account of a storm at sea than the full meteorological description.

We can even provide a quasi-Darwinian explanation for the ubiquity and utility of folk psychology. The neural explanation of mind is truer but harder to learn than folk psychology. Older views that the mind is a spirit that performs its functions by virtue of powers supernaturally planted in it were false — or at least unprovable and unscientific — but easier to learn. The neural theory is too complex, the spirit myth too simple. If we had to acquire the true but complex theory in order to deal with ourselves, we'd never deal with ourselves. If we had to deal with ourselves under the simple picture of vital spirits or souls, without even the vocabulary of memory, reason, imagination, belief, idea, and image, then we wouldn't survive long. Folk psychology is the mean between these two extremes that exceeds them both in survival value. It is the account of ourselves that abridges enough complexity to fit into the head, and respects enough complexity to count as an explanation and give rough predictions that satisfy the needs of daily life. It is not the most effortless position, or the most explanatory position, but it is the most effortless explanatory position.

Similarly, the use of induction undoubtedly has greater survival value than its avoidance. Without induction we couldn't conclude, even after many experiences, that fruit is better to eat than sand, that fire burns, or that this snake with the pretty pattern on its back is probably poisonous, like the last one. Induction may be part of the fabric of our ordinary ignorance, a rule of folk logic, a useful fiction; but it makes life possible.

There are many folk sciences, including folk physics. To folk physics things like this podium are made of substance; substance is something hard that fills space. This explains why you don't fall through a podium when you lean on it. However, the podium to real physics, as Arthur Eddington put it, is mostly empty space in which

sparsely scattered...are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the [podium] itself.[\[Note 16\]](#)

My hand is also mostly empty space sprinkled with moving charges. The fact that I don't fall through the podium when I lean on it is explained by probability theory, not by the folk concept of substance. Like our other witnesses, Eddington agrees that even the few people who learn the truth about the podium forget it when they leave their desks.

...[M]odern physics has by delicate test and remorseless logic assured me that my second scientific [podium] is the only one which is really there — wherever 'there' may be. On the other hand I need not tell you that modern physics will never succeed in exorcising that first [podium]... which lies visible to my eyes and tangible to my grasp.[\[Note 17\]](#)

If Eddington is right, then at your desk you might bring yourself to appreciate the truth and start with fear that your hand might one day sink halfway into your desk until the odds shifted again. Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinian writer, once recollected the limits of induction at his desk, and had the panicked thought that he might be the first human being never to die.

The idea of folk science, like the idea of the natural standpoint, is an attractive elaboration of the simpler idea of forgetfulness. It is not the same as error or superstition; it is not an arbitrary

truncation of a complex discipline; it is the particular truncation with survival value, the most simplification compatible with useful degrees of explanation and prediction. In this sense there is surely a folk economics and a folk plumbing. But I have many questions. Why is there no folk petroleum engineering? If practice gives us skill at holding more complex and accurate theories in our minds in 'the normal paths of ordinary life', then can these complex and accurate theories displace the folk theories when we leave our desks? Can we learn not to forget what we learn?

## 5.

Forgetfulness, original dullness, the natural standpoint, and folk science all seem to trace their origin to our 'nature', which is just what Hume said. He didn't simply impute the eclipse of refined thought to an undefined 'human nature'. He had a much more articulate explanation. For Hume, belief is a habit, and a function of the repetition and vivacity of a stimulus. Abstruse reasoning (as he called it) in support of a difficult idea is rarely repeated often enough to become ingrained as belief, and is certainly not as vivid as its rivals from ordinary life like physical exertion, music, sunlight, laughter, doing laundry, or bungee jumping.

Very refin'd reflections have little or no influence upon us; and yet we do not, and cannot establish it for a rule, that they ought not to have any influence....[\[Note 18\]](#)

Exactly. Abstruse thinking is not false, only weak.

Every thinker we've examined regrets the weakness of thought against the vivacity of experience. You might say these are academics talking, regretting the loss of their labor. This is true, but there is more here than professional interest. If theories truer than folk theories are too weak to guide our lives in the face of stronger distractions, then our lives are stunted and diminished. The loss of truth is not just an academic's narrow concern. The question is not whether academics can live their theories, but whether honesty, clarity, and subtlety can be sustained; and this question should affect all of us.

Hume, however, does not regret the forgetfulness that arises from his 'nature'. Or more precisely, he leavens his regret with gratitude. His desk-philosophy is skeptical. While skepticism was a source of tranquillity for the ancient Greeks, it has been a cause of anxiety for everyone since. Hume did not bungee jump; but he did have friends. And if enjoying his friends away from his desk displaces the memory of his skepticism, even if his skepticism is justified, then he is grateful. Hume writes,

Most fortunately it happens that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds [of skepticism], nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.[\[Note 19\]](#)

That's when you ask for an extension. Note that Hume says: *most fortunately*. Descartes thought he could overcome his doubts with reasoning. But to Hume this was naively optimistic. Doubt cannot be overcome by reasoning, only by forgetfulness. While Socrates sought to recollect what he had forgotten, Hume seeks to forget. Hume is ambivalent. On the one hand, his doubts are justified. To lose them to forgetfulness is like losing truth. On the other hand, doubt interferes



with life, just as life interferes with doubt. Therefore forgetfulness is balm.

But Hume never forgot the price he paid for the balm of forgetfulness. As a skeptic, Hume took pride in purging himself of unwarranted beliefs and he disparaged those who took pride in their certitudes. So in honesty he had to conclude that, because his 'nature' forced him to certitudes, it forced him to *foolishness*. When he left his desk he was as much a fool as the dogmatists he criticized at his desk. His conclusion?

No: If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing certainly are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable.[\[Note 20\]](#)

Since his nature compels the foolishness of belief, he will wisely live with the beliefs compelled by his nature.[\[Note 21\]](#)

This is where the story ends. From one point of view, Hume had the best of both worlds. He came to studied, philosophical conclusions that he believed were justified, and when these were overridden by the more vivid beliefs of ordinary life he acquiesced cheerfully. Either he had his philosophy or his friends. For him the victory of ordinary life was a defeat for philosophy, but since he lived on both sides, he was always a victor.

From another point of view, Hume had the worst of both worlds. Philosophy made him melancholy. But it was powerless against the force of nature it explained so well. The ordinary life that displaced philosophy was not wise oblivion to academic pedantry; it was folly and he always knew that. So life for him was vacillation between skeptical melancholy and dogmatic rashness. Hume's life and work proved a point that yours may soon prove, that we never welcome the loss of the perspective of the desk until we have lost the perspective of the desk. We never welcome forgetfulness until we have forgotten.

Hume showed both regret and gratitude for his forgetfulness —to use three terms of folk psychology in one sentence. His regret can be generalized to a ground for staying in school. Without the concentration of the desk, subtle truths evaporate. His gratitude can be generalized to a ground for leaving higher education. We must 'dispell the clouds' of melancholy created by living in the furnace of reflection. This does not imply leaving truth forever, but long enough to make merry with our friends.

In short, the bad news is that forgetfulness washes over us when we leave our desks to do our laundry or laugh with our friends. Or was that the good news? The good news is that ordinary life wins; eventually you graduate and leave. Or was that the bad news?

The lesson from all this, to paraphrase the bumper sticker, is that forgetting happens. You *will* forget. Even though gratitude is possible, Hume's gratitude would not keep me from being very pessimistic if I didn't recognize three grounds for optimism. First, what is forgotten can be remembered, even for Socrates. Second, many things will not even be forgotten. Third, the natural standpoint is educable; folk-scientific revolutions are possible. The ordinary ignorance of what we know can be affected by study. Inquiry is not pointless.

Even the unqualified pessimistic thesis does not assert that there is no subtlety, complexity, or truth away from the academy, only from the desk. And *the desk* here is a metaphor; what I really mean by 'the desk' —apart from empty space sprinkled with wavicles— is a moment of calm, isolated concentration in which we can recollect. Fortunately the unqualified pessimistic thesis is false; and even more fortunately, there are desks in this metaphorical sense wherever we make

them. My challenge to you is to make such moments of recollection for yourselves and use them to make use of what you know.

When I showed a draft of this talk to Liffey, she told me to *say something memorable*. A fine idea, I thought. Is *this* memorable? Let's put it this way. If you forget it by next week, then you'll know it was worth remembering. [\[Note 22\]](#)

There is something about a liberal arts education that resembles a psychology experiment. You volunteer, match words with pictures for an hour, and think you are being tested on memory or association or pattern recognition. But you are really being tested on speed, or compliance with authority figures, or eyeball movements. The chief difference is that in the psychology experiment, you get debriefed afterwards. My unauthorized debrief is that, while you may have thought college is about mastering theories at your desk, it is really about taking that mastery away with you. You may have thought it is about knowing; but it is about living what we know. You can't live all truth; this is Hume's Theorem. But you can try to live more of it rather than less. If we take Meno seriously, then the challenge is to hold what you know, and what you come to know, not just in moments of concentrated recollection, but in the 'normal paths of ordinary life'. Otherwise the truth you know is only known and not lived. The challenge is to practice, not memory, but non-forgetting, and to hold truth as *aletheia*.

## Notes

1. Quoted in an article on Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker by Frances FitzGerald in *The New Yorker*, circa 4/23/90. Dave Barry was referring to the Bakkers. [\[Resume\]](#)
2. H.G. Reza, "11 Officers Cheat in National City Promotion Test; Police: Applicants for Senior Posts are Caught in Scandal, But No Disciplinary Action is Taken," *Los Angeles Times*, Friday, August 10, 1990, p. B.1. The cheating occurred May 16 and 17, 1990; Rodney King was beaten March 3, 1991. Thanks to Chuck Shepherd for the tip, and Dialog for enabling me to find the story online. [\[Resume\]](#)
3. I apologize to the faculty who heard me apply the Meno story to information technology at a faculty retreat a couple of years ago. I also apologize to my students in "Nineteenth Century Philosophy" who have heard me apply it to the history of post-Kantian German and Danish philosophy. I've been obsessed with this story for many years. [\[Resume\]](#)
4. Plato, *Meno*, 80.d. [\[Resume\]](#)
5. Heidegger was apparently the first to make philosophical use of this etymology. See his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Mannheim, Yale University Press, 1959 (original 1953), at pp. 86, 102, 154-161. [\[Resume\]](#)
6. Plato, *The Republic*, 621.a. [\[Resume\]](#)
7. Descartes, *Meditations* (original 1641), trans. Laurence J. Lafleur, Bobbs-Merrill, 1964, p. 79. The clause in italics was added by Descartes in his own French translation (1647) of the second Latin edition (1642). [\[Resume\]](#)
8. Descartes, *ibid.* at 80. [\[Resume\]](#)
9. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer, Penguin Books, 1966, section 190; cf. section 821. [\[Resume\]](#)

10. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (original 1739), ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford University Press, 1897, p. 214; see also 183, 187, 269, 213, 214-15, 269, 271, 274; see also his *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding* (original 1748, 1777), ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford University Press, second ed., 1902, pp. 159, 160, 162. Compare Pascal *op. cit.* section 540: "It is necessary to relax the mind a little, but that opens the door to the greatest excesses." [\[Resume\]](#)

11. Hume, *ibid.* at 216. [\[Resume\]](#)

12. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Science of Knowledge [Wissenschaftslehre]* (original 1794-95, 1797, 1802), trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970, p. 31.n; cf. 55.n, 79, 161. [\[Resume\]](#)

13. I thought I was borrowing the phrase "original dullness" from James Branch Cabell in *Beyond Life: Dizain des D,miurges*, Robert M. McBride and Co., 1919. However, while he offers many expressions close to these words in sections 50 and 90, I cannot now locate this exact phrase in his work. [\[Resume\]](#)

14. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (original 1913), trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson, Macmillan, 1931, pp. 91ff. [\[Resume\]](#)

15. Of Patricia Churchland's work, see especially *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain*, MIT Press, 1986; and "Replies to Comments to a Symposium on Patricia Smith Churchland's *Neurophilosophy*," *Inquiry*, 29, 2 (June 1986), 241-72. [\[Resume\]](#)

16. Arthur S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World*, Macmillan, 1929, at p. x. In the original, Eddington speaks of tables, not podiums. [\[Resume\]](#)

17. Eddington, *ibid.* at p. xii. He makes clear his belief that the table of physics is the true table, and that of 'folk physics' an illusion, at pp. 323-24. [\[Resume\]](#)

18. Hume, *Treatise, op. cit.* at 268; see also pp. xviii, 144, 153, 154, 185, 186, 212, 214. [\[Resume\]](#)

19. Hume, *ibid.* at p. 269. [\[Resume\]](#)

20. Hume, *ibid.* at p. 270. [\[Resume\]](#)

21. Compare Pascal, *op. cit.* section 661: "The mind naturally believes...so that when there are no true objects for [it, it] necessarily becomes attached to false ones." [\[Resume\]](#)

22. If you remember it very well next week, then my thesis is probably false. So you can forget it. [\[Resume\]](#)