

**“Thinking” is a *Present Active Participle*, and Other Forgotten Truths:
A Socratic Dialogue**

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If death is a removal from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be than this? . . . I would like to spend my time there, as here, in examining and searching people’s minds, to find out who is really wise among them, and who only thinks he is.

Socrates in *The Apology*, 41a-b

There was a knock at the door. Startled from his reverie, the Professor rose abruptly from his chair, scattering the two or three dozen tiny slips of paper that had been so neatly arranged on his desk and nearly tripping over the stack of learned, and not-so-learned, tomes that formed a small mountain in the center of the room—“many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore”, whose strange teachings he had always sought to remember.

He was puzzled—though not surprised—to find the passageway outside his study empty, when the knocking came again. This time the direction of the sound was clearer to him, his attention having by now made its descent from What Is to what seems. The gentle tap, tap, tapping was proceeding from a large and ornately carved Wardrobe standing opposite the Professor’s desk, a beautiful and imposing piece of mahogany that had been used for many years to house not clothes but ancient manuscripts.

As he reached for the Wardrobe, his eager expectation of Magic Worlds was rewarded, and the door swung open of its own accord, or rather by the force of the hand that had pushed it from within, the hand—as he delightedly saw at once—of his beloved Socrates, who without an instant’s pause gathered up the skirt of his *himation* and nimbly stepped over this most unusual threshold and into the Professor’s room. The look of sheer benevolence on his Master’s face, a look brimming with light and deeply rooted in “the peace which passeth all understanding”, emboldened the Professor to be the first to speak.

“I am of course immensely honored,” he somewhat stumbingly managed. “But I don’t understand . . . I mean it’s unclear to me why . . .”—and then his words failed him completely.

“It’s alright,” Socrates spoke in a consoling tone, but with an unmistakably ironic twinkle in his eye. “I knew you’d be surprised. You’re wondering why, after all your years of reading and teaching people about ‘my’ ideas, I should have chosen just this moment to come and greet you in person. Aren’t you working on something rather especially important? It was thought perhaps I might be of some use.”

“Well, I don’t know how ‘especially important’ it is,” the Professor somewhat cautiously replied, “but I’ve been asked by some students to deliver my Last Lecture. Unless I succeed in so incensing my audience that they take my life when I’ve finished, it won’t of course actually *be* my last lecture, but I’m nonetheless to imagine it so, and thus to present what amounts to an intellectual Last Will and Testament, condensing such insights and advice as I have and offering them up in a final bequest. And I confess I’m finding the assignment more difficult than I expected. I’m beginning to realize that the imagined finality of the task, or shall I say rather the finality of the imagined task, more than makes up for the fact that the talk is to be relatively short and informal. Any more *penultimate* an academic obligation—were it the composition and publication of a book, let us say, something deans and such insist to be of *such* significance, or were it even the more important and welcome work of conducting my students through an entire course of lectures—is beginning to seem to me simple and indeed almost trivial by comparison.”

While the Professor was speaking, Socrates had been moving quite deliberately about the study, taking stock of the various books on the shelves, reverencing the icons on the walls, and flipping through the pages of a calendar he had noticed on the desk, with the bemused expression of one who has grown unaccustomed to the strictures of time. But now, taking advantage of a small cushion he had found in one corner of the room, he seated himself Buddha-like on the floor, with remarkable deftness for one his age. Himself now an icon, he seemed rooted to the earth just as he had been in Alcibiades’ account, his flowing garment hieratically settled round him. It was obvious he had heard everything the Professor said.

“A ‘Last Lecture’,” Socrates pronounced the words slowly. “This does indeed present quite a challenge, and it was doubtless for this reason that my ticket was changed.”

“Your ticket?” queried the Professor.

“Yes, I was supposed to be going to Dharamsala to meet with the Dalai Lama. He’s been having some trouble, you know, walking the fine line between conversation and compromise in his dialogues with modern scientists. And then I was to journey on to Cairo to consult with the *Ulama* at Al-Azhar, who are much beset with the problem of how to explain—in a way that breaks through the media filters and challenges the Western stereotypes—the enormous difference in traditional Islamic law between the life-giving death of the true Muslim martyr and the death-giving life of the terrorists. But orders were handed down late last night that my destination had changed, and so here I am in this very genial study of yours, ready and willing to help you think through your Departing Disquisition. What do you plan to talk about?”

“I’m very happy to hear your final wish was granted, Socrates,” the Professor said, “and that you’ve been spending eternity as you’d hoped in continued cross-examination. As for what I plan to talk about, I’m afraid I’m rather stumped. Given the opportunity to put what I know—or what I *think* I *may* know—on the line, I’m not sure where to start. There’s so much one could say.”

“Hence,” said Socrates, “those many slips of paper I see scattered across your desk, numbered each and marked with symbols strange. Let’s try to bring some order to this muddle. Supposing you reduced all you’ve been pondering to its barest essentials, distilling everything down into—say—three basic points, what would they be?”

“I hadn’t realized you were a Trinitarian, Socrates. Isn’t that a tad anachronistic of you?”

“Oh, I’ve kept up on my reading. But don’t be misled. I’m a Unitarian, too—and a Non-Dualist, for that matter, if we’re keeping track numerically. But you’re not answering my question.”

“Very well,” the Professor took a deep breath. “Boiling everything down to essentials, and with the clear understanding that the basic points you’ve asked me for are but so many stars in a sky of possibilities, the topics I suppose I would most like to touch

on are: Religion as Science, Death as Pure Gain, and Thinking as Act. As I'm sure you can see, in each case I have you to thank for what little I may be able to offer."

"Yes, I *can* see that," Socrates responded, "but only because I can see you from the inside out. I'm afraid those in your audience not yet blessed with my peculiar relation to space will require some assistance. So let's try to elaborate. First of all: Religion as Science. Would I be correct in assuming that when you use the word "science" you *don't* mean 'empirical knowledge of the material world'?"

"Of course", the Professor said. "As you yourself taught me, 'empirical knowledge' is a contradiction in terms. Science means knowledge, and to *know* a thing is to have perfect certainty as to its existence and nature, something no amount of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, or smelling could ever yield—enhanced though they be by any number of expensive, NSF-funded instruments. The world, or seeming world, of the senses, which appears to most of us so substantial and solid, is but a whirling play of ever shifting energies, called into being *by* those very senses, or rather by the expectations of minds that have misidentified themselves with their bodies and that have grown accustomed therefore to depending on their eyes and ears and other physical organs to inform them about what they think is real. Isn't this what you were getting at in your Allegory of the Cave and in the careful distinction you made there between opinion and knowledge?"

Mesmerized by these grandiloquent words, the Professor had failed to notice, but for the last several seconds a force, at first just a ripple, had been spreading outward from the very center of Socrates' belly, and it now broke like a tidal wave, shaking the old man's body from top to bottom, as he boomed with laughter. "Did I say something wrong?" the Professor asked with some dismay. "What's so funny?"

"Two things," the Master said, choking down another hearty laugh. "Two things, at least! First, I find it *most* amusing that you would credit me with a doctrine that sounds decidedly more Hindu or Buddhist than Greek. I can see why you're always telling your students that you're not much of a scholar! Second, it's rather funny to think that you could actually convince anyone of the Truth of these high-sounding notions in a single lecture. 'Minds misidentified with their bodies', indeed! Do you seriously think anyone will have the slightest idea what you're talking about?"

The Professor, shame-faced, was struggling inwardly, undecided as to whether he should defend himself or offer up a respectful concession. What came out was something of each. “You’re right of course, Socrates. It’s foolish to think I could say anything really valuable on this subject in so short a time, especially to so eclectic an audience. But I’ve spent my career trying to help people understand and gain access to the true Sources of Certainty, and if this talk is to be my valedictory, it wouldn’t make sense not to try, one final time, to shed a little light on the real meaning of Knowledge. And besides, look at you, sitting there like a yogi! Is there really so great a difference between an Athenian Hindu and an Indian Platonist?”

“Relax, Professor.” Socrates motioned kindly with his hand, beckoning his offended host to sit beside him. “What you say about the likeness of these far-flung doctrines may be true. But even if it isn’t, Plato was right to have implied—and you to have to inferred—that the only genuine Science, the only truly methodical way of ascertaining what’s Real, is embedded in the world’s great religions. In fact this is what I was going to talk with the Dalai Lama about, for though he sits atop one of the subtlest and most magnificent metaphysical treasures in the world, he sometimes forgets himself when endeavoring to meet the physicists and bio-feedback experts on their own turf and in their own terms. But the word *embedded* needs stressing. As you yourself know, Professor, the Tibetan practice of meditative deconstruction, like the spiritual kernel of every religion, is encased in a shell of manuscript fragments, archeological artifacts, cultural adaptations, and emotional allegiances, and since most of the so-called experts in your field spend all their time hammering away at this carapace and wrangling with each other as to which of the bits they chip loose may have come first in some temporal sequence, an academic audience is about the last group of people capable of distinguishing the Light from its refractions. If you just tell them that Religion is Science, most will write you off as insane.”

“Alright, so supposing I make it clear,” the Professor brightened, “that what I have in mind is not *all* religion or religion *as such*, but the doctrines and contemplative methods of the great spiritual masters: Shankara and Patanjali among the Hindus, Ibn Arabi or Rumi in the case of Islam, and in Christianity a Maximus or Meister Eckhart.”

Socrates had the look of a proud alumnus just recently returned from a class reunion. “Oh yes, these are first rate scientists, to be sure—and good friends, I might add. But just reciting this rather odd list of names will hardly serve your purpose. Even the most sympathetic members of your audience could hardly be blamed for refusing to throw out everything they’d ever thought about experimentation and evidence—to say nothing of the very nature of matter, time, and space—on the strength of a few hastily marshaled esoteric allusions. We’re talking after all about a total transformation of consciousness and hence the complete uprooting of the sense nearly everyone has of being locked inside a bag of skin. People don’t take lightly to having their most cherished convictions overturned. I’ve had some personal experience in that area, you know. Speaking of which, perhaps we should go on to the second of your points, something about death, if my ancient memory still serves.”

Nodding in agreement, the Professor turned to the books arrayed beside him, pulling a hefty and much-annotated volume from near the bottom of the stack and opening it to a page he had already marked.

“In assuming this is my Last Lecture,” he chose his words carefully, “I must also assume that I’m terminally ill, in fact nearly dead. As I’ve always told people, being a professor is for me a vocation and not just a job, and as long as I can hobble, or for that matter be wheeled or carried, into a college classroom, I shall want to teach. It is with me as it was for you with your *daemon*. There’s an inner voice, and I cannot but obey.”

“But if I’m dying,” the Professor continued, “what better moment to speak about the real meaning, the inward event, of death itself? Before you arrived, I was looking through Plato’s record of your conversation with Phaedo and friends, and I thought my lecture might be a good place to quote a maxim of yours I’ve been endeavoring to follow, however feebly, for many years. ‘Those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead.’ You *did* say that, didn’t you?”

“I *may* have.” Socrates appeared to have no interest in biographical or bibliographical details. “But you yourself know what it’s like when students quote you out of context and years after the fact.”

The Master had taken the *Collected Dialogues* from the Professor’s hands and was running his finger down the page. “Hmm . . . Just what I thought. I think you’d also

do well to pay attention to the context. I say what I'm supposed to have said—it *is* a memorable little maxim, isn't it?—but look how Plato goes on: 'And Simmias laughed and said, "By Zeus, Socrates, I don't feel much like laughing just now, but you made me laugh. For I think the *multitude*, if they heard what you just said about philosophers, would say you were quite right. . . . [They] would agree with you *entirely* in fact that philosophers desire death, and they would add that they *deserve* it!"' I'm afraid, Professor, you're going to find yourself confronting a flummoxed, if not laughing, multitude if you pursue this topic in your talk. If a single lecture isn't the right place for broaching the first of your Forgotten Truths—that of Religion as Science—it seems even less the proper venue for meditating on . . . what did you call it? . . . Death as Pure Gain? Most of your audience, I'm assuming, will be students, and I can assure you you'll never persuade the young they're anything short of immortal, even if you make them sit alone all night among the bones in a charnel house."

"But that's *not* the sort of death I had in mind," the Professor objected sharply. He was becoming increasingly frustrated, increasingly concerned he would never get his lecture written, and he was therefore paying no attention to his manners. But then he caught himself. "I'm sorry," he blushed. "I don't mean to argue with you."

"Well, why in Heaven's Name *not*?" the Master shot back. "What do you think good conversation *is*? Argument, Professor, argument! I think you've been to too many academic conferences and committee meetings. Does no one *struggle* for the Truth anymore?"

Taken completely aback by this response, the Professor tried to read the expression on Socrates' face. What he saw, or thought he saw, was an uncanny—and unearthly—combination of fierceness and unqualified delight. The lines around the mouth and the set of the jaw were unmistakable signs of deep conviction, and something more than conviction: an implacable determination of will and intensity of intellection such as no mortal countenance had ever revealed to him. But there was at the same time a sparkling mirth and a look of joyous invitation in the eyes—a look that said, "Finally, you're getting this. Don't just sit back and listen. Fight with me!"

Bracing himself for what might come, and putting aside all thought of his impending deadline, the Professor took a deep breath and replied, "The death I'm talking

about when I speak of Death as Pure Gain is not the death that is measured by the flat-line on an electroencephalograph—not a merely transitional death. It’s the death that comes, or should come, *before* the body dies, a death into Life that puts an end to all transition, the death prescribed in that wonderful quatrain by Angelus Silesius:

Die thou before thou diest,
That so thou shalt not diest
When thou dost come to die;
Else thou diest utterly.

But *surely*, dear teacher, it was this prior death you too had in mind in your maxim: ‘Those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead.’”

“*You* may be sure what I meant, Professor, but all I’ve ever been certain of is my ignorance. Perhaps, however, if you help me we can together unravel the mystery of a death before death.”

“I’m happy to be of assistance, Socrates.”

“It is *I* who am the servant, my friend. This is your lecture, and the thoughts you are pregnant with are your own. But if the delivery is to be a successful one and the child fit enough to grow to manhood, you mustn’t just answer as you suppose I prefer. You must say what you really think.”

“I shall do my best to be honest.”

“Very good. Now, you say, or say *I* said, or rather quote Plato as having *said* I said, that the best of lives, the philosophic and thus examined life, consists in a perpetual examination of death and dying.”

“Whether you said it or not, Socrates, this is what I believe.”

“Do you also believe that the examination of a thing requires or presupposes some participation in it, or is hearsay enough?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Consider then how one learns a language. Could I be said to have ‘studied’ English, let’s say, if I’d never heard this language pronounced, nor seen a printed English word, nor ever tried to speak or write in English?”

“I catch your drift, Socrates. No, the student of a language must in some way be involved in his subject if he expects to learn it. And may I compliment you, by the way,

on your mastery of our tongue? Your diction is impeccable. Where did you pick up so large a vocabulary?"

The Master smiled. "I've had many good tutors. I used to make fairly regular stopovers in London, and Geoff and I would sometimes walk in the evening along the old road toward Canterbury, chatting as we strolled, and of course Bill was usually up for a beer or two after one of his plays at the Globe. Lots of late night dialectic with Jack and the other Inklings also helped to keep me fit. But we stray from the topic. Can you see what our examination of examination implies?"

"I believe so, Socrates. It implies that any true examination of Death requires of the student that he in some way be *mortified*. Reading an obituary is not the study of death. Dissecting a cadaver is not the study of death. Even imagining oneself, like Tom Sawyer, at one's own funeral is not the study of death. Only in dying is there true study of death."

"So then, Simmias and the others are right, and *I* was right," said Socrates, "when I told you you'd only be laughed at."

"I don't understand." The Professor was confused. "Why would anyone laugh at this?"

"I *myself* wouldn't laugh," said the Master, though his eyes *were* laughing. "But it's not very hard to see why others *would* when they hear you tell them, in that crisp and somewhat melodramatic style you so often affect in the classroom, that the only good philosopher is a dead one!"

"But that's not what I'm saying!" came the desperate retort. "Or rather, yes, I'm saying that, but I don't mean it. I mean I don't mean that the maxim should be taken as you suggest!" The Professor was by now almost completely entangled in his words, and he looked as if he might cry. His recent bravado notwithstanding, he wasn't doing nearly as well with real Socratic dialogue as he might have imagined he would. Seeing the poor man's predicament, Socrates was all compassion.

"In the old days," said Socrates, "when I was still in that state which the living call life and was obliged to ferret out my interlocutor's thoughts through dialectic alone, we would've had to take the long way round. But now that I'm no longer subject to the Newtonian Laws—I've had words with Isaac about this—and can easily look out through

your eyes, it might be better if I just slipped into your space for a moment or two and said for you what you're trying to say, which is in any case what I'd planned to talk with the *Ulama* about during our meetings in Cairo. It would do me good to rehearse, and it will save you some time. I know you're anxious about your talk, and we haven't gotten yet to the third and last of your three basic points."

The Professor shrugged his shoulders, feeling spent. All the short-lived fight had gone from him. "Fine," he sighed. "Whatever you think is best."

No sooner had he uttered these defeated words than his whole being began to reverberate, as if resonating to a pitch too deep for ears to hear. Where just the instant before he had felt drugged and drowsy, he—or Something more than he—was now fully awake within him. A blossoming Lucidity unlike anything he had ever experienced before had taken hold of his mind. It was dazzlingly bright and infinitely desirable. And now It, or he, or They began to speak.

"Death is Pure Gain," the words were intoned as if they were some magic incantation, "when it is Death to all position and resistance, a perpetual displacement and unceasing Ecstasy of otherness as Self. Position and resistance are the roots of merely seeming life, a living death. Living death is life in what becomes, ever waxing, waning, and decaying, of what must be hoped for, feared for, fought for, never fixed nor stable. To gain and guard and thus preserve his seeming self, Man contends for a space to call his own, his body, but this contention must itself be self-defeating. For the *wish-to-be* cannot but circumscribe true Being, making of It an inverted image, something false and fabulous. He only who 'counts not equality with God a thing to be grasped, but empties Himself, taking the form of a servant', can flow forth past the boundaries that never were, gaining anew what He always Is."

Something gently released him then, and the Professor felt as if he were falling, falling from a height beyond the sky, falling past the Nine Choirs of Angels, down past the stars and through the Seven Spheres of the Planets, falling down, down through the clouds until at last he slipped through the roof of his house and into the crumpled shape huddled on the floor of his study.

Socrates was ministering to him with those best of gifts, a bite of warm brownie and a sip of milk, when the Professor realized where he was. "Here, my friend," the

Master was speaking, and his affectionate smile was Generosity itself. “This will help. You need to rest a minute.”

It was in fact several minutes before the color began returning to the Professor’s cheeks. Socrates, satisfied that his student was ready to continue their tutorial, put the plate of sweets aside and gently said, “I’m afraid we’d better get back to your lecture. Time is running out, and I shall need to leave you shortly.”

“I didn’t . . . suppose . . . you would be . . . affected . . . by time.” As the Professor slowly and rather awkwardly pronounced these words, the very first of a newly discovered Life, they felt somehow strange in his mouth—“thick” or “sticky” were the only adjectives he could think of later—as if, having been running along a beach, he now found himself knee deep in the surf and thus obliged, not yet having learned to swim, to force his legs forward against an unfamiliar pressure or resistance.

“Oh, I’m *not*,” said Socrates. “Not affected at all. For me time is no more. But it’s still immensely important to the people I’m sent to, you know, and I mustn’t keep them waiting. You appear to me ready—if understandably reluctant—to go on with our dialogue, so we’d better stick to schedule. Tell me please about the third of your Forgotten Truths. You’d said earlier you wished at least to touch upon the topic of Thinking as Act. What exactly do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know . . . *exactly*,” the Professor responded. He was regaining his footing in the world of syllables, and speech came more easily now. “Or rather I do *know* exactly, but I don’t know exactly *how*, or whether it is *I* or Someone *Else* who does the knowing.” He chuckled softly, well aware that this sentence would seem preposterous to all but Socrates, but no longer particularly anxious as to whether his talk would be well received. Even if only a handful of people in the lecture hall were able to glimpse the rough outlines of what he hoped to convey, he would be content.

“If you’d like, however,” the Professor continued, “what I *can* tell you is what I *would* have said until just a few minutes ago. And perhaps it’s just as well to put the clock back, since no one is ever going to believe what just happened anyway.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” Socrates agreed, “and may I suggest that you do your very best to keep things as simple as possible? Your poor audience will have

doubtless grown weary by the time you reach this last part of your presentation, and you owe it to them to be as straightforward and as brief as possible.”

“Alright I’ll try,” said the Professor, “but I’m warning you it’s not going to be easy. Because when I talk about Thinking as Act, I’m talking about the key to everything else in the lecture. To understand Thinking as Act is to see precisely the sense in which Religion is Science and why Death is Pure Gain. This is the fulcrum upon which the other two topics must be precisely balanced. One wrong move here, and everything will come tumbling down.”

The Professor lowered his eyes for a moment or two, pondering how best to proceed. It was clear to Socrates that his student had gained enough strength to make his way forward at least a few steps on his own, and the Master therefore remained searchingly silent.

“Everything has become so irremediably bottoms-up in the world of academia,” the Professor lamented. “The reductionists are everywhere, and the irony is that they seem utterly incapable of understanding how incoherent and self-contradictory their theories are. For if what they say were true, what they say would be of no serious interest. The widespread acceptance of Darwinian evolutionism is but a case in point. Leaving aside whether this biological theorem is of any use in explaining the physical dimension of creatures, it’s obviously of no use at all in explaining man’s mind, or rather, if it *is* of use, then there’s no *mind* to explain.”

Socrates gently interrupted. “My dear Professor, I share your regrets, and I agree completely that reductionism has become a nearly universal problem, which any Last Lecture worth its salt should attempt to address. But the sand in my glass is running out, and so, I expect, will be the patience of your listeners, so I think you’d better get to the point.”

“Well, the point is this,” said the Professor obligingly. “It seems to me that the evolutionists, and historicists, and behavioral psychologists, and socio-biologists, and all the other brands of nothing-butterists so easily have their way in the academic arena because people are no longer able to think in the present tense. Actually I don’t want to put it that way. I have no idea, quite frankly, whether Man’s powers were any greater in this respect in the past. Perhaps not—perhaps what I’m speaking of has been a common

disability from time immemorial. If Plato's descriptions of your encounters with the Sophists are even close to accurate, the sickness is an ancient one indeed. Nor of course do I mean to imply that they're haven't been, and aren't, exceptions to the rule; *you're* clearly exceptional, and thanks to you *I* felt rather exceptional myself a few minutes ago! But by and large what I say is undeniable. People seem incapable of a truly active mentation—of staying focused, by a deliberate act of will, on what the poet Coleridge called 'the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking'. They've forgotten (if they ever knew) that 'thinking' is a *present active* participle."

"It's also a gerund, of course," Socrates interrupted, "but I do see your point." He was now speaking more as a coach or trainer than as a master, and his voice was encouraging. "If however you really expect to enter into this rarified realm in your lecture, you'd better do at least two things. You need to make it much clearer than you have so far why the evolutionists and their ilk can't explain the Act of Thinking, and you need to provide your listeners with at least some hint as to how they might become active thinkers themselves. It wouldn't be fair to diagnose their malady and then leave them no hope."

The Professor sighed, not for the first time in their conversation, but it was no longer out of exasperation or discouragement. It was simply that the full weight of the task he had set himself was more apparent than ever. Maybe he *had* bitten off too much. But at this point it was too late to turn back.

"It seems to me," he chose his words carefully, "that if I could just get my audience to begin the difficult process of *looking at their looking*, I might be able to do what you ask and kill these two birds with one stone. Or if beginning the process itself is too much to expect, and it probably is, I would at the very least like for them to understand that there *is* such a process—that special Methods of Training exist for precisely this purpose, Methods capable of turning the energies of knowing back upon the Knower and awakening a perpetually active state of Inner Clarity. Since most of my listeners will doubtless be from Christian backgrounds, it would make sense to single out Hesychasm and its techniques for guarding the Heart as a prime example of what I'm talking about. But of course I won't be able to go into details. There won't be enough time, and besides a public forum isn't the appropriate setting.

“What perhaps I *can* do, however—at least with a few of my listeners—is to get them to see that even in its present, largely somnambulant form, their power of thinking simply *can’t* be accounted for by anything less alive, less conscious, less actual, less fully in the present than itself. Too many people, too many supposedly educated people, have been seduced by the great Reductionist Lie, in one or another of its Hydra-like forms. Many have come to believe that the mind is nothing more than the brain and that thinking is nothing more than biochemical activity. But even those of a less materialist bent have been mesmerized by the claim that ideas are merely the conditioned effects of culture, or gender, or historical period, or political persuasion, or race, or tax bracket. More than perhaps anything else in the lecture, I’d like to help my audience understand concretely, deep down in their very bones, that *if* these and other such assertions were true, they’d be just as true for the people who made them as they are for the rest of us, from which it logically follows of course that the assertions themselves wouldn’t be worth taking seriously, insight of any kind into Truth having been declared impossible. People need to be assisted in seeing that every declaration of truth, even the sophomorically incoherent assertion that ‘There is *no* truth’, necessarily presupposes a mind radically *free* from all biological determination and all cultural conditioning. Every one of my books and all the articles I’ve ever written have included reminders of this essential Principle, and anything purporting to resemble my parting shot to the world will have to return one final time to this immensely important issue. For it seems to me undeniable that . . .”

The Professor stopped in mid-sentence. Socrates had said nothing, but he had suddenly risen to his feet, and the graceful alacrity of his movement was enough to remind his student that time was short. The expression in the Master’s eyes was as concentrated and attentive as always, but the concentration seemed somehow larger and more comprehensive now, and it was obvious that what he was attending to in the Professor’s study, however undividedly, was but a fragment of his total vision, only one tiny point within a vast plane of responsibilities.

“I suppose it’s in the nature of things,” Socrates wryly observed, “that a professor should be *professorial*, but you really do talk a lot, you know!”

Earlier in their dialogue the Professor might have been embarrassed by these teasing words, but he was happy to find that all he felt now was a desire to join in the fun.

“I *can* be rather longwinded, *can't* I?” he smiled. “But that’s how we academics get promoted and tenured, you know. The more printed, published, and peer-reviewed our words the better! I would therefore be immeasurably grateful, Socrates, for any suggestions you have as to how I might achieve my aim more succinctly.”

“But wouldn’t that be self-defeating, my friend?” the Master replied. He paused for a moment before continuing, as if to give the Professor a sufficient space in which to make this observation his own. “Whatever suggestions I could offer you couldn’t help but be less alive, less conscious, less actual, less fully in the present than your own active effort of thinking, and if it’s the very *act* you mean to stress in your lecture, then surely you ought to do so in a way that exhibits what you’re talking about.”

The Professor wished he were once again lifted up into that exhilarating and exalted state of Wakefulness he had so recently, if very briefly, enjoyed. His mind seemed so sluggish now, so out of pace with itself, its energy divided, diverted, and distracted once again by a buzzing multitude of propositions and arguments. All he could do was look confused, so Socrates spoke once more.

“You need to think again, Professor, and with greater care, about what it means to say that ‘people need to be assisted in seeing’ these things.”

“I’m happy to think again about *everything*,” the Professor replied. “You were the one who taught me after all that Dialectic is the Science that proceeds by demolishing its own hypotheses. But surely you of all people won’t disagree about the need for assistance in this difficult task.”

“I don’t disagree in the slightest,” said Socrates, summoning up all his midwifery skills. “The question, however, is what *form* this assistance should take. You want me to tell you what to say so that you in turn can tell your listeners what to think. But I repeat, wouldn’t that be self-defeating?” The Master had begun moving toward the open door of the Wardrobe, and though his words remained as clear as crystal, the Professor had the curious sense that the pitch of his voice had begun descending toward an ever deeper register. “It was as if,” he said later, “I were standing alongside a railway track, listening to the whistle of a speeding train as it passed away from me and into the distance.”

“It’s a *very poor* teacher,” Socrates was saying, “who seeks to inject insight as if it were fluid in a hypodermic syringe. If you think you can get your audience to do

something active by doing something *for* them, or by giving something *to* them, or by *persuading* them to some course of action, then I fear at best you'll only perpetuate the problem, both in them and in you. Even if they believe you—in fact *especially* if they 'believe' you—all you'll have succeeded in doing is attaching them to yet another *thought* as if it were *thinking*, as if a perfect passive participle were the present active."

Having offered this good-natured rebuke, Socrates tightened the sash about his waste, made a small bow toward an Icon of the Blessed Virgin, embraced his disconcerted student in what was meant to be a comforting hug, and bestowing a parting smile and an encouraging wink stepped decisively over the threshold and into the Wardrobe.

"Yes, yes, I see what you're saying, Master," the Professor blurted out the words, "but . . . but what am I supposed to *do* about it? What would *you* do in my place?"

"I wouldn't give a Last Lecture," said the emptiness where Socrates had been. "I'd have a Final Discussion."

As the sound of these words trailed away—away into the distance, but also it seemed into the very depths of his heart—the Professor gently closed the door of his manuscript chest and walked musingly back toward his chair, taking care not to disturb the stack of books that had been piled like a small mountain on the floor of his study.

"Lord, have mercy!" he exclaimed as he consulted his watch. He had had no idea so much time was passing. The day had nearly drawn to a close, and the hour of the lecture would soon be upon him. He must finalize his preparations, come what may.

Looking for a moment at the tiny slips of paper arranged in such neat and tidy rows across his desk, numbered each and marked with symbols strange, he suddenly swept them aside—and then laughed at himself for this uncharacteristic act of deliberate rashness. Time was short, but he knew he must start from scratch. Picking up his pen with one hand, he reached with the other for some fortification from the plate beside him. "Hmm, what is this?" he said, less surprised to find the brownie itself than to find it so warm. It seemed in fact to be fresh from the oven. "Where in the world had that come from?" he wondered.

