

"On the Authority of the Senses," by
Norman Mailer with Michael Lennon

Editor's note: In prior conversations between Mailer and Lennon, Mailer fleshed out his principal beliefs—his personal religion, if you will, formed by 50 years of observation of the human condition. After abandoning atheism, Mailer says, he recognized that he did believe in God. "The conviction grew that I had a right to believe in the God I could visualize: an imperfect, existential God doing the best He (or She) could manage against all the odds of an existence that not even he, our Creator, entirely controlled. Note the possessive: our Creator. God, as I could visualize such a being, was an Artist, not a lawgiver, a mighty source of creative energy, an embattled moralist, a celestial general engaged in a celestial war, but never a divinity who was All-Good and All-Powerful." The exchanges that follow expand upon man's relationship to God, the devil and sensory perception.

MICHAEL LENNON: *You've spoken of the authority of the senses many times, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas or quoting Hemingway. What exactly is this authority based on? What empowers it? If God is your answer, then to complicate the question, can't we say that evil in all cultures has almost always been associated with the flesh and the senses?*

NORMAN MAILER: My basic premise proposes that there's a different mixture of God and the Devil in every one of us. Some of that variety creates the shape of our character. You'll hear one person say about another, "He's a good guy, he's stand-up, but he sure can be a son of a bitch." In ourselves and others, we find this constant interplay of good and bad.

If we are going to talk about these matters, I think we would do well to approach them with the confidence that humans have the right to explore anything and everything—at our spiritual peril, but we do have the right. It seems to me—how to put it?—I see no reason for a divinity to put everything into a Book and expect that to be our only guide. He gave us free will. Or She gave us free will. Once again, let's leave gender out of it. If we were given free will, then the Book is the first obstacle to it.

What's the role of the senses?

I would say the senses were given to us by God. If I'm ready to go in for speculations such as these, I would even go so far as to say that mind may have been the contribution of the Devil—or, at least, more so than God. How can I justify such a remark? Animals seem to function extraordinarily well on their instincts and their senses. To a large degree, they have community—ants, bees, all the way up to primates. There is an extraordi-

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edited
by Lennon

nary amount of communication we can witness in animals, and they are undeniably superior to us in one manner: They don't go around slaughtering one another in huge numbers. If, by every other mode of moral judgment, we see ourselves as superior, still we know that animals left to themselves are not going to destroy the universe. But we could. So it may be a true question: Did the Devil invent mind? Or is this still God's domain? Or, more likely, does the search for dominance there become the field of battle?

There is no question in my mind that the Devil did enter mind. And, not being the first Creator, did His best to invade the senses as well, to corrupt the senses. But the question is sufficiently complex to assume that the senses are neither wholly God given nor Devil ridden.

But the line you quoted, which has puzzled me for decades, is "Trust the authority of the senses."

St. Thomas Aquinas said that, and Hemingway, in his way: "If it feels good, it is good." I've never read Aquinas in depth, but I was taken with the notion that the most formal of the Catholic philosophers had presented this rule of thumb. What I think it means—leave Aquinas out of it—is that we must trust the authority of the senses because that is the closest contact we have to the Creator; however, it is a most treacherous undertaking. As anyone who's ever enjoyed a drink knows, the authority of the senses on a boozy spree is exceptional. You feel so much, see so much—and that's even more true on marijuana. You trust the authority of the senses until, perhaps, they become so intense that God and the Devil seem to be there working with you full-time. We've all had the experience of an extraordinary trip on drink and/or pot, but what I know is that the end result is as often disaster as happiness. I won't pretend that every time you get drunk beyond measure nothing good will happen. It occurred to me at a certain point in my life that I had never, up to that moment, gone to bed with a woman for the first time without being drunk. Since some of the most important experiences of my life occurred that way, I can hardly wish to argue that drink serves the Devil alone. Given the rigors of modern society, it's possible we'd never get anywhere without liquor or pot.

The other thing you said that gave me pause was how the Devil invades mind. On more than one occasion you have suggested that scientific thinking undercuts metaphoric, intuitive thinking, and I wonder if that is what you see as the invasion of mind by the Devil.

It seems to me our minds work on two disparate systems. One is based on the senses. Metaphor, for example, is almost

impossible without being somewhat attuned to nature, to its often subtle shifts of mood. That depends so much on one's senses. But then there is another faculty of mind that can be as cold as the polar cap. Indeed, it is a readiness to repel the senses, distrust them, even calumniate them as powers of distortion. This readiness to free oneself from the senses may be exercised most by the Devil.

Almost everything I dislike in the modern world is super-rational: the corporation, the notion that we can improve upon nature, to tinker with it egregiously, dramatically, extravagantly. Nuclear bombs, as one example, came out of reason. It's not that scientists, filled with an acute sense of their own senses, brought their creative intimations to the atom bomb. On the contrary, it was an abstraction away from the senses, a pure flight of mind that came to the conclusion that it was possible to make the bomb—and then, that it had to be done, not only to defeat Japan but for the furtherance of science itself.

This may be related. I'd like to talk about Thomas's Gospel. In Elaine Pagels's book [Beyond Belief], Thomas's Gospel states that as human beings, we all have the obligation to "bring forth what is within." And if we do, it will save us. If you keep in what is in, repress it, whatever it is—it will destroy you.

I used to believe that entirely. I now think it to be generally true but risky. Because what does it mean to bring forth what is within? I work on the notion that there's godliness within us and diabolism as well. So to bring forth what is within you, it is necessary, very often, to send out the worst elements of yourself. Because if they stay within, they can poison you. That is much more complex than saying, "Get it out! Act it out. Be free, man! Liberate yourself." Because very often what comes out is so bad that it injures others, sometimes dreadfully. You could say that every crime of violence is a way of getting the ugliness in oneself out, acting it out, doing it. If, for example, the need to get falling-in-the-gutter drunk thereby intensifies the miseries of everyone in your family, it is doing nothing good for others. Or excessive gambling. Or beating children. Or entering sexual relations with them. To the degree that certain ugly emotions are acted out, others are injured terribly by your freedom to do so. I could argue that it is often a Devil's urge you are expressing.

You have to ask yourself at a given moment, "Who is speaking within me?"

How do you answer that?

Well, I can give you one story; it's fascinated me for years. At a certain time in my life, I was feeling rocky. My third wife had decided she didn't want to go on with our marriage at a time when I

had been hoping. "Maybe this time I can start to build a life." She was a very interesting woman but easily as difficult as myself. So when she broke it up, I didn't know where I was. And I remember one night, wandering around Brooklyn through some semi-slums—not the hard slums but some of the tougher neighborhoods a mile or two out from my house in Brooklyn—not even knowing what I was looking for, but going out, drinking in a bar, sizing up the bar, going to another bar, looking...this is ironic, but in those days, you actually would go to a bar and look for a woman. I think you still can, but it's been so long now since I did it that I can no longer speak with authority. Anyway, I found no woman. I went into an all-night diner—because I realized I was hungry, not only drunk but hungry—and ordered a doughnut and coffee, finished it. Then a voice spoke to me. I think it's one of the very few times I felt God was speaking to me. Now, of course, one can be dead wrong. I go back to Kierkegaard—just when you think you're being saintly, you're being evil; when you think you're being evil, you might be fulfilling or abetting God's will at that point. In any event, this voice spoke to me and said, "Leave without paying."

It was a minor sum—25 cents for coffee and a doughnut in those days. I was aghast because I'd been brought up properly. One thing you didn't do was steal. And never from strangers! How awful! I said, "I can't do it." And the voice—it was most amused—said, "Go ahead and do it," quietly, firmly, laughing at me. So I got up, slipped out of the restaurant and didn't pay the quarter. And I thought about this endlessly. If it was God...as I said, this was the closest I ever came to trusting the authority of my senses. My senses told me this was a divine voice, not a diabolical one. It seemed to me that I was so locked into petty injunctions on how to behave, that on the one hand I wanted to be a wild man, yet I couldn't even steal a cup of coffee. To this day, I think it was God's amusement to say, "You little prig. Just walk out of there. Don't pay for the coffee. They'll survive, and this'll be good for you."

Now, I've thought about this often because it's a perfect example of how difficult it is for us to know at a given moment whether we're near to God or to Satan, which is why Fundamentalists can drive you up the wall—their sense of certainty is the most misleading element in their lives. It demands, intellectually speaking, spiritually speaking, that one must remain at a fixed level of mediocrity.

You know, this always stops me. I try to think how you would translate your metaphysics, your cosmology, into an ethical system. It's not just the Fundamentalists. Most religious systems say, "Okay, we have the theology, now

let us show you how that translates into ethics." But what you tell me over and over again is "We can't be sure." It would be very difficult to construct an ethical system by which to live one's life based on your scheme of beliefs. Have you thought of that?

I accept your point. I do search for an ethic I can believe in. And that is where I go back to trusting the authority of my senses. They can also be—what's the word I'm looking for?—traded. To the degree that the Devil may affect our senses, they can become a perfect place for Him to get to us. That would be the Devil's aim exactly—to enter our senses, make us feel we are having a godly emotion, when in fact we are being inspired by the Devil.

So I hope I never construct an ethic by offering a few bones. The worst to be said about Fundamentalism is that it reduces people to the reflexes of a good dog. If a good dog is upset, give it a treat.

Fundamentalism is comfortable.

It's comfortable, but it is limiting. I keep going back to Kierkegaard, who, for my money, was probably the most profound Christian. He searched into the complexity of our relation not only to divinity but to diabolism as well. He knew that we must take nothing for granted in the moral firmament. We cannot kneel forever before the neon sign that purports to be God's mystery: "Don't ask, just obey!"

Fundamentalists, beneath everything else, feel the same fears that existential thinkers suffer—that the whole thing can come to an end. Fundamentalists look to alleviate that fear by way of what I would call their desperate belief that it's "God's will" and at the end they will be transported to Heaven. Well, once again, this supposes that God is All-Good and All-Powerful and will carry the righteous right up there. Of course, that offers nothing to the idiocies of human history, particularly that the more we develop as humans, the worse we are able to treat one another. Why? Because we now have the power to destroy one another at higher, more unfeeling levels. This can be epitomized again and again by repeating the familiar example I take from the concentration camps—telling poor wretches that they're going to have a shower to get rid of lice, and instead they die with a curse in their hearts. That's more hideous, in a certain sense, than dropping a bomb on 100,000 people—on people you know nothing about. And yet you have Fundamentalists carrying on about abortion, speaking of it as thwarting God's will. What does it have to do with God's will if you kill 1,000 people in one minute with gas? Or destroy hundreds of thousands in an instant of atomic man-made lightning from the sky? What does that do to God's will?

We might assume that God, like us, is doing the best that can be done under the circumstances. God is our Creator. God put us here. We are God's artistic vision, we are God's children, if you will, and it's not a good parent who looks always to control the child. The mark of a good parent is that he or she can take joy in the moment when a developing child begins to outstrip the parent. God is immensely powerful but is *not* All-Powerful. God is powerful enough to give us lightning and thunder and extraordinary sunsets, incredible moments where we appreciate God's sense of beauty. But if God is All-Powerful, then how can you begin to explain the monstrosities of modern history? There are theological arguments by great theologians that these horrors are to test us. But this reduces our concept of God to a stage director who says, "Let the actors follow the script. Do not give them access to the playwright."

In one of our earlier conversations, you said humans were created by someone or something not unlike ourselves. So we are then, in some way, created in the image of God?

Yes. I believe that.

Doesn't that suggest we are more good than evil?

Whether it's 50-50, 60-40, 70-30, the odds change in each of us because there's an intense war that goes on forever, not only between God and the Devil but—I've said this before—God and the Devil as they war within us. We make our own bargains with Them. God and the Devil do not have the resources to be in complete control of us all the time. It isn't as if we walk through a normal day, and there's God on one shoulder and the Devil on the other—not at all. They come to us when we attract their attention, because it affects Their interest as well as ours.

What I use as the notion behind these assumptions that divine energy is analogous to human energy—it is not inexhaustible. God and the Devil are each obliged to manage their own economies of energy, which is to say that they will give more attention to certain elements of human behavior than to others. Very often, they withdraw from certain people. Too much is being given, too little is coming back.

Given this supposition, I feel more ready to make an approach to the question of ethics. It must be obvious in all I've said so far that I not only am an existentialist but would go so far as to say that we do not know our nature. We only find out about ourselves as we proceed through life. And as we do, we open more questions.

Jean Malaquais once made a splendid remark—at least for me—during the course of a lecture. He was a brilliant

lecturer, and in the middle of a verbal flight—this was at the New School—some kid said bitterly, “You never give us answers. You only pose questions.” And Jean stopped in the full flight of his rhetoric and replied, “There are no answers. There are only questions.”

The point is that the purpose of life may be to find higher and better questions. Why? Because what I believe—this is wholly speculative but important to me—is that we are here as God’s work, here to influence His future as well as ours. We are God’s expression, and not all artworks are successful.

What I’m offering to people as an ethic is to have the honor to live with confusion. Live in the depths of confusion with the knowledge back of that, the certainty back of that—or the belief, the hope, the faith, whatever you wish to call it—that there is a purpose to it all, that it is not absurd, that we are all engaged in a vast cosmic war and God needs us. That doesn’t mean we can help God by establishing a set of principles to live by. We can’t. Why not? Because the principles vary. The cruelest obstacle to creating one’s own ethic is that no principle is incorruptible. Indeed, to cleave to a principle is to corrupt oneself. To shift from one principle to another can, however, be promiscuous. Life is not simple. Ethics are almost incomprehensible, but they exist. There is a substratum of moderate, quiet, good feeling. Generally, if I’m doing things in such a way that the sum of all my actions at the moment seems to be feasible and responsible and decent, that certainly gives me a better feeling than if I am uneasy, dissatisfied with myself and not liking myself.

So it isn’t so much that you have no ethical system but one that cannot be abstracted nor carved on tablets for people to carry around and consult whenever they have to make a decision. Life is always more complicated than any rule that can be laid down.

What I’m asking for... This is an odd analogy, but not entirely. There are certain people who worship sex, good sex. I might be one of them. What I’ve noticed about good sex, when it’s really good, is the extreme sensitivity with which you proceed. At a given moment, it’s a creative dance. There is such a thing as a pure act of love when every moment is distinctive and lovely and fine. That does happen. For most people, it happens so rarely that they remember it—and then remember it and remember it. A sense of perfection does live in our concept of sex.

In the same way, sometimes, for short periods in our lives, I think there’s an analogous sense of perfection to all sorts of basic emotions—in love, in nurture, in caring for people, in grieving, in mourning. It’s very hard to mourn, mourn openly and honestly. Mourning

is an element in people's lives that can be duplicitous, even ugly. Take a wife who's been married to a man for 40 years—and in her mourning, what if she detects a secret spot of glee? "That selfish bastard is finally gone." So mourning can be shocking for people because they discover sides of themselves they never knew existed—or the reverse.

I remember something else you said about getting close to yourself: "If you dig deep enough into yourself, you're going to come out your asshole."

[N.M. laughs]

In other words, yes, there are doors, and you must open many of those doors, and the ensuing doors within doors, but every once in a while you want to be careful about what you open.

Well, of course you have to be careful about certain doors. Anyone who flings everything ajar at once would be blown away. A mighty change could rage through all the rooms in your psyche. One of the most jealously self-protective elements in human nature may be to protect oneself from one's own dark and barricaded corners.

So I don't think it's a real problem that we're going to open, by mistake, *all* the doors at once—we don't. We can't. What I meant by the closer you get to yourself, the closer you are to coming out of your own asshole has to do with something I'd like to attach to this discussion concerning the nature of defecation, shit and waste. It may be worth getting into. As a small premise, think of people who are terribly prudish about evacuation. They don't want to think about it, don't talk about it, it's beneath them, they hope it is terribly far away from them. I'd say, ethically speaking, that's not a comfortable way to be. Far better that when you're sitting on the throne—parenthetically, it's interesting that we have that metaphor, "the throne," precisely for the toilet—when you're sitting on the throne, you do well to be regal about it and enjoy the sniffs of your own waste. Sniff your own shit and decide for yourself if you're a little more healthy or a little more unhealthy than you thought you were the last time you sat down. That's part of being close to yourself. You take this notion that what comes out of you may be unpleasant, but it is certainly real. It can be the nearest we come to a fact.

In your view, is there any merit or value in the holy books of the great religions, or do you think they should be seen as historical artifacts, quaint, useless curiosities?

No, no.

What is their use, then?

Well, if they're seen as general principles rather than as absolute dicta, they can be of great use. The Ten Commandments—most of us do react within the framework of those 10 injunctions. The point is not to build up an inner sense of self-righteousness—"I obey the Ten Commandments, and therefore I am nearer to God." No, they are crude guides. "Do not kill." Well, yes, do not kill. Does that mean you have to piss in your pants if you have a gun in your hand and you're face-to-face with Adolf Hitler in 1941? No, you kill him. At that point, I would not consider "do not kill" an absolute command.

So you're not interested in jettisoning the great holy books of the world; you just want to qualify them.

Not qualify. I want us to cease looking upon them slavishly. Once one becomes a peon to any part of one's mind, one is then open to the dark side of the moon, which is mass destruction.

[I would like to see] more readiness for humans to accept the heroic demand that they stop leaning on God, stop relying on God and start realizing that God's needs could be greater than ours, God's woes more profound than our own. God's sense of failure may be so deep as to mock our sense of failure. God, I believe, is, at present, far from fulfilling His own vision. He is mired in our corporate promotions all over the globe, our superhighways, our plastic, our threats of nuclear warfare, our heartless, arrogant, ethnic wars, our terrorism, our spread of pollution all over His environment. How can God's sorrow not be immeasurably greater than ours?

Rely too much on God, and we are comparable to a tremendously selfish child who drives a parent into exhaustion, deadens the parent through endless demands. "Save me! God, please, can I have that beautiful dress I want for the high school prom? Thank you, God, deliver it to me, God." [pause] "If you don't, God, I'll be angry at you" is the underlying element in so many of the prayers. Or the abject beseechment—"God, have pity on me, I'm a poor worm."

I think we become a hint more heroic if we recognize that we do have to stand on our own. So I can feel a certain respect for atheists. I have huge disagreements with them—the first might be the absolute refusal of a majority to consider the notion of karma for even a moment. Or any kind of Hereafter—their determined intensity that there will be nothing after life. This creates its own sort of trouble. It fortifies the liberal notions that we have to take care of people we know nothing about and enter strange countries and provide them with democracy, whether they desire it or not. Needless to say, Christians have been doing the same

for a long time.

Lennon

On the Authority of the Senses by Norman Mailer with Michael Lennon

ML { Michael Lennon: You've spoken of the authority of the senses many times, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas or quoting Hemingway. What exactly is this authority based on? What empowers it? If God is your answer, then to complicate the question, can't we say that evil in all cultures has almost always been associated with the flesh and the senses?

Norman Mailer: My basic premise proposes that there's a different mixture of God and the Devil in every one of us. Some of that variety creates the shape of our character. You'll hear one person say about another, "He's a good guy, he's stand-up, but he sure can be a son of a bitch." In ourselves and others, we find this constant interplay of good and bad.

If we are going to talk about these matters, I think we would do well to approach them with the confidence that humans have the right to explore anything and everything—at our spiritual peril, but we do have the right. It seems to me—how to put it?—I see no reason for a divinity to put everything into a Book and expect that to be our only guide. He gave us free will. Or She gave us free will. Once again, let's leave gender out of it. If we were given free will, then the Book is the first obstacle to it.

ML { What's the role of the senses?

NM { I would say the senses were given to us by God. If I'm ready to go in for speculations such as these, I would even go so far as to say that mind may have been the contribution of the Devil—or, at least, more so than God. How can I justify such a remark? Animals seem to function extraordinarily well on their instincts and their senses. To a large degree, they have community—ants, bees, all the way up to primates. There is an extraordinary amount of communication we can witness in animals, and they are undeniably superior to us in one manner: They don't go around slaughtering one another in huge numbers. If, by every other mode of moral judgment, we see ourselves as superior, still we know that animals left to themselves are not going to destroy the universe. But we could. So it may

MM be a true question: Did the Devil invent mind? Or is this still God's domain? Or, more likely, does the search for dominance there become the field of battle?

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ML But the line you quoted, which has puzzled me for decades, is "Trust the authority of the senses."

MM St. Thomas Aquinas said that, and Hemingway, in his way: "If it feels good, it is good." I've never read Aquinas in depth, but I was taken with the notion that the most formal of the Catholic philosophers had presented this rule of thumb. What I think it means—leave Aquinas out of it—is that we must trust the authority of the senses because that is the closest contact we have to the Creator; however, it is a most treacherous undertaking. As anyone who's ever enjoyed a drink knows, the authority of the senses on a boozy spree is exceptional. You feel so much, see so much—and that's even more true on marijuana. You trust the authority of the senses until, perhaps, they become so intense that God and the Devil seem to be there working with you full-time. We've all had the experience of an extraordinary trip on drink and/or pot, but what I know is that the end result is as often disaster as happiness. I won't pretend that every time you get drunk beyond measure nothing good will happen. It occurred to me at a certain point in my life that I had never, up to that moment, gone to bed with a woman for the first time without being drunk. Since some of the most important experiences of my life occurred that way, I can hardly wish to argue that drink serves the Devil alone. Given the rigors of modern society, it's possible we'd never get anywhere without liquor or pot.

[You have me thinking of Blake's line: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

ML It's implicit in what I just said, but I think I'd be happier if the line had gone: "The road of excess can lead to wisdom." I'm not in favor of excess because I've ruined too much in just that way. Blake did have an apocalyptic mind, which he served manfully, full-time. It's one of the reasons his remarks inspire the highest flights of fancy. But on the other hand, he is seen by our modern spirit as signally impractical. CUT]

ML The other thing you said that gave me pause was how the Devil invades mind. On more than one occasion you have suggested that scientific thinking undercuts metaphoric, intuitive thinking, and I wonder if that is what you see as the invasion of mind by the Devil. Scientific method, logic, linear thinking is opposed to the leaps of intuition in metaphor.

NM Often. It seems to me our minds work on two disparate systems. One is based on the senses. Metaphor, for example, is almost impossible without being somewhat attuned to nature, to its often subtle shifts of mood. That depends so much on one's senses. But then there is another faculty of mind that can be as cold as the polar cap. Indeed, it is a readiness to repel the senses, distrust them, even calumniate them as powers of distortion. This readiness to free oneself from the senses may be exercised most by the Devil.

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ML This may be related. I'd like to talk about Thomas's Gospel. , [where it's made clear that human beings have the obligation to bring forth what is within. You had better say what this particular Gospel is. Thomas's Gospel is, of course, not in the Bible but is a suppressed apocrypha, discussed most recently by Elaine Pagels. CUT] In [Elaine Pagels's book on the subject], Thomas's Gospel states that as human beings, we all have the obligation to "bring forth what is within." And if we do, it will save us. If you keep in what is in, repress it, whatever it is—it will destroy you.

NM I used to believe that entirely. I now think it to be generally true but risky. Because what does it mean to bring forth what is within? I work on the notion that there's godliness within us and diabolism as well. So to bring forth what is within you, it is necessary, very often, to send out the worst elements of yourself. Because if they stay within, they can poison you. That is much more complex than saying, "Get it out! Act it out. Be free, man! Liberate yourself." Because very often what comes out is so bad that it injures others, sometimes dreadfully. You could say that every crime of violence is a way of getting the ugliness in oneself out, acting it out, doing it. You could even advance the argument that there are people who will contain what is ugly within them—and that's their honor. It's a complex matter—often there are people who will sacrifice themselves in order not to injure others. For example, if you act out something dreadful in yourself— if, for example, the need to get falling-in-the-gutter drunk thereby intensifies the miseries of everyone in your family—it is doing nothing good for others. Or excessive gambling. Or beating children. Or entering sexual relations with them. To the degree that certain ugly emotions are acted out, others are injured terribly by your freedom to do so. I could argue that it is often a Devil's urge you are expressing.

You have to ask yourself at a given moment, "Who is speaking within me?"

ML [How do you answer that?

NM Well, I can give you one story; it's fascinated me for years. At a certain time in my life, I was feeling rocky. My third wife had decided she didn't want to go on with our

marriage at a time when I had been hoping, "Maybe this time I can start to build a life." She was a very interesting woman but easily as difficult as myself. So when she broke it up, I didn't know where I was. And I remember one night, wandering around Brooklyn through some semi-slums—not the hard slums but some of the tougher neighborhoods a mile or two out from my house in Brooklyn—not even knowing what I was looking for, but going out, drinking in a bar, sizing up the bar, going to another bar, looking . . . this is ironic, but in those days, you actually would go to a bar and look for a woman. I think you still can, but it's been so long now since I did it that I can no longer speak with authority. Anyway, I found no woman. I went into an all-night diner—because I realized I was hungry, not only drunk but hungry—and ordered a doughnut and coffee, finished it. Then a voice spoke to me. I think it's one of the very few times I felt God was speaking to me. Now, of course, one can be dead wrong. I go back to Kierkegaard—just when you think you're being saintly, you're being evil; when you think you're being evil, you might be fulfilling or abetting God's will at that point. In any event, this voice spoke to me and said, "Leave without paying."

It was a minor sum—twenty-five cents for coffee and a doughnut in those days. I was aghast, because I'd been brought up properly. One thing you didn't do was steal. And never from strangers! How awful! I said, "I can't do it." And the voice—it was most amused—said, "Go ahead and do it," quietly, firmly, laughing at me. So I got up, slipped out of the restaurant, and didn't pay the quarter. And I thought about this endlessly. If it was God . . . as I said, this was the closest I ever came to trusting the authority of my senses. My senses told me this was a divine voice, not a diabolical one. It seemed to me that I was so locked into petty injunctions on how to behave, that on the one hand I wanted to be a wild man, yet I couldn't even steal a cup of coffee. To this day, I think it was God's amusement to say, "You little prig. Just walk out of there. Don't pay for the coffee. They'll survive, and this'll be good for you."

Now, I've thought about this often because it's a perfect example of how difficult it is for us to know at a given moment whether we're near to God or to Satan, which is why Fundamentalists can drive you up the wall—their sense of certainty is the most misleading element in their lives. It demands, intellectually speaking, spiritually

NM speaking, that one must remain at a fixed level of mediocrity. \[It's a great irony, because many of them who are good Christians, or Orthodox Jews, are compassionate. I don't know much about Islam, but I'm sure the same is true there. You can have fine people, wonderful people, Fundamentalists full of compassion . . . can say in passing, if God was ever going to mingle in our affairs, Christ is more than a metaphor. Compassion is probably the •nest emotion we humans can have. When tears come to our eyes for the sorrow of someone else, that may be as close as we get to reaching the best element in ourselves. But, there again, it's difficult to know how pure any moment of compassion is. And any false variety of it can be toxic. When it is manufactured by constant adjurations applied to the daily habits of Fundamentalists, compassion can become the opposite of itself, and turn into an instrument for power. "Follow me because I feel compassion for you."

Speaking crudely, if half the Fundamentalists in the world are truly compassionate, the other half are on an egregious power-trip...CUT]

ML You know, this always stops me. I try to think how you would translate your metaphysics, your cosmology, into an ethical system. It's not just the Fundamentalists. Most religious systems say: "OK, we have the theology, now let us show you how that translates into ethics." But what you tell me over and over again is, "We can't be sure." It would be very difficult to construct an ethical system by which to live one's life based on your scheme of beliefs. Have you thought of that?

NM I accept your point. I do search for an ethic I can believe in. And that is where I go back to trusting the authority of my senses. They can also be—what's the word I'm looking for?—traded. To the degree that the Devil may affect our senses, they can become a perfect place for Him to get to us. That would be the Devil's aim exactly—to enter our senses, make us feel we are having a godly emotion, when in fact we are being inspired by the Devil.

So I hope I never construct an ethic by offering a few bones. The worst to be said about Fundamentalism is that it

MM | reduces people to the reflexes of a good dog. If a good dog is upset, give it a treat.

ML | Fundamentalism is comfortable.

It's comfortable, but it is limiting. I keep going back to Kierkegaard, who, for my money, was probably the most profound Christian. He searched into the complexity of our relation not only to divinity but to diabolism as well. He knew that we must take nothing for granted in the moral Firmament. We cannot kneel forever before the neon sign that purports to be God's mystery: "Don't ask, just obey!"

NM [We can, of course, for the sake of this argument, pay another visit to the subject of Fundamentalism. After all, a good many Fundamentalists do function with vigor. Their lives have been simplified. They don't worry over questions that are debilitating. They function very well—at their medium level. No great writer ever came out of Fundamentalism, nor any great scientist. To my knowledge, very few talented actors came out of Fundamentalism—or stayed with it for long. Never a genius of any kind, not since Augustine and Aquinas.

So perhaps Fundamentalism is for the less daring, the less bold, the less gifted? But aren't you living on an ethical razor's edge, listening to inner voices to find the right word? That's not something everyone can emulate. Yes, people want to live in such a way that they will feel secure. But there may be no such security available. Right now, parenthetically, we are living in a time where we have to wonder if we will even see the end of the twenty-first century. Or will we destroy ourselves? In that sense, directly, there is no spiritual security.

So the CUT] Fundamentalists, beneath everything else, feel the same fears that existential thinkers suffer—that the whole thing can come to an end. Fundamentalists look to alleviate that fear by way of what I would call their desperate belief that it's "God's will" and at the end they will be transported to Heaven. Well, once again, this supposes that God is All-Good and All-Powerful and will carry the righteous right up there. Of course, that offers nothing to the idiocies of human history, particularly that the more we develop as humans, the worse we are able to treat one another. Why? Because we now have the power to

MM destroy one another at higher, more unfeeling levels. This can be epitomized again and again by repeating the familiar example I take from the concentration camps—telling poor wretches that they're going to have a shower to get rid of lice, and instead they die with a curse in their hearts. That's more hideous, in a certain sense, than dropping a bomb on one hundred thousand people—on people you know nothing about. And yet you have Fundamentalists carrying on about abortion, speaking of it as thwarting God's will. What does it have to do with God's will if you kill a thousand people in one minute with gas? Or destroy hundreds of thousands in an instant of atomic man-made lightning from the sky? What does that do to God's will?

We might assume that God, like us, is doing the best that can be done under the circumstances. God is our Creator. God put us here. We are God's artistic vision, we are God's children, if you will, and it's not a good parent who looks always to control the child. The mark of a good parent is that he or she can take joy in the moment when a developing child begins to outstrip the parent. God is immensely powerful but is not All-Powerful. God is powerful enough to give us lightning and thunder and extraordinary sunsets, incredible moments where we appreciate God's sense of beauty. But if God is All-Powerful, then how can you begin to explain the monstrosities of modern history? There are theological arguments by great theologians that these horrors are to test us. But this reduces our concept of God to a stage director who says, "Let the actors follow the script. Do not give them access to the playwright."

ML [In one of our earlier conversations, you said humans were created by someone or something not unlike ourselves. So we are then, in some way, created in the image of God?

NM Yes. I believe that.

ML [Doesn't that suggest we are more good than evil?

MM [Potentially more good. When a good man and a good woman have a child, there's every reason to believe that child will be a good person. But it's not guaranteed. Good parents can have evil children.

NM If we're created in God's image and we're potentially good but then choose evil, perhaps we were evil all along.

ML Look at your phrase—"evil all along." If, at Creation, the Devil was present and entered us as well, then what we speak of as original sin can be seen as God's obligatory collaboration with the Devil. We were born good and evil. Fifty-fifty?

MM The point is, CUT! Whether it's fifty-fifty, sixty-forty, seventy-thirty, the odds change in each of us because there's an intense war that goes on forever, not only between God and the Devil but—I've said this before—God and the Devil as they war within us. We make our own bargains with Them. God and the Devil do not have the resources to be in complete control of us all the time. It isn't as if we walk through a normal day, and there's God on one shoulder and the Devil on the other—not at all. They come to us when we attract their attention, because it affects Their interest as well as ours.

What I use as the notion behind these assumptions that divine energy is analogous to human energy—it is not inexhaustible. God and the Devil are each obliged to manage their own economies of energy, which is to say that they will give more attention to certain elements of human behavior than to others. Very often, they withdraw from certain people. Too much is being given, too little is coming back.

Given this supposition, I feel more ready to make an approach to the question of ethics. It must be obvious in all I've said so far that I not only am an existentialist but would go so far as to say that we do not know our nature. We only find out about ourselves as we proceed through life. And as we do, we open more questions.

Jean Malaquais once made a splendid remark—at least for me—during the course of a lecture. He was a brilliant lecturer, and in the middle of a verbal flight—this was at the New School—some kid said bitterly, "You never give us answers. You only pose questions." And Jean stopped in the full flight of his rhetoric and replied, "There are no answers. There are only questions."

The point is that the purpose of life may be to find higher and better questions. Why? Because what I believe—this is wholly speculative but important to me—is that we are here as God's work, here to influence His future as well as ours. We are God's expression, and not all artworks are successful. But we are here because God has a vision of existence that is at odds with other visions of existence in the universe. There we get into the real

question of cosmic hegemonies. There may be a majordomo at the core, maybe not. There may be gods—the heavens may be analogous to pagan times. These gods are fighting for dominance over one another.

So we come back once more to "Where is the ethic?" And again I return to trusting the authority of our senses. What now do I mean by that? Isn't it true that as we free ourselves of false conceptions of what life might be, as we free ourselves of the maxims and injunctions other people have put into us from childhood, as we come to have a better sense of "whatever I am, I am beginning to have my own ideas," you can also develop some instinct that one is doing the right thing or one is not. Or, all too often, one is not doing much. As we get older, "Not much at all" can take over most of our lives. If I am doing a crossword puzzle, there is no high motive necessarily involved. Instead, the activity might be to some most modest degree on the side of evil—I'm consuming time that could be spent in better ways. Or, to the contrary, I might be preparing my system to get ready for something worthwhile. It's not a large question: I do the crossword puzzle, and I don't think about it as good or evil. And I don't think of myself as good or evil so much as probably leaning slightly in the right direction or the wrong one when it comes down to how I am exercising my time.

So if you ask where the ethic is at any moment, it can be no more than that one is the resultant of all the forces that are in you as that vector confronts all the forces supporting you and opposing you. It's as if we live in a triangular relationship with God and the Devil, trying to sense the best thing to do at a given moment, be it a good thing or a bad thing. Let me go back to what might have been my lone visitation from the Lord. What God might have been trying to tell me was, "Get over this notion of good, right, proper. Because very often when you're moving in a direction you think improper, you might be helping Me more than when you're trying to be proper. Because when you're trying to be proper, you could be poisoning yourself with frustrated annoyance that makes you a colder person and of less use to Me." CUT]

What I'm offering to people as an ethic is to have the honor to live with confusion. Live in the depths of confusion with the knowledge back of that, the certainty back of that— or the belief, the hope, the faith, whatever you wish to call it—that there is a purpose to it all, that

NM it is not absurd, that we are all engaged in a vast cosmic war and God needs us. That doesn't mean we can help God by establishing a set of principles to live by. We can't. Why not? Because the principles vary. The cruelest obstacle to creating one's own ethic is that no principle is incorruptible. Indeed, to cleave to a principle is to corrupt oneself. To shift from one principle to another can, however, be promiscuous. Life is not simple. Ethics are almost incomprehensible, but they exist. There is a substratum of moderate, quiet, good feeling. Generally, if I'm doing things in such a way that the sum of all my actions at the moment seems to be feasible and responsible and decent, that certainly gives me a better feeling than if I am uneasy, dissatisfied with myself, and not liking myself.

[Now, obviously, there is room for error. We all know about vanity. There are people who, when they like themselves, are dangerous. When they think they are extraordinary and fabulous, they can be awful. CUT]

ML So it isn't so much that you have no ethical system but one that cannot be abstracted nor carved on tablets for people to carry around and consult whenever they have to make a decision. Life is always more complicated than any rule that can be laid down.

NM What I'm asking for.... This is an odd analogy, but not entirely. There are certain people who worship sex, good sex. I might be one of them. What I've noticed about good sex, when it's really good, is the extreme sensitivity with which you proceed. At a given moment, it's a creative dance. There is such a thing as a pure act of love when every moment is distinctive and lovely and fine. That does happen. For most people, it happens so rarely that they remember it--and then remember it and remember it. A sense of perfection does live in our concept of sex.

In the same way, sometimes, for short periods in our lives, I think there's an analogous sense of perfection to all sorts of basic emotions--in love, in nurture, in caring for people, in grieving, in mourning. It's very hard to mourn, mourn openly and honestly. Mourning is an element in people's lives that can be duplicitous, even ugly. Take a wife who's been married to a man for forty years--and in her mourning, what if she detects a secret spot of glee? "That

selfish bastard is finally gone." So mourning can be shocking for people because they discover sides of themselves they never knew existed—or the reverse.

NM [Sometimes people die whom you thought you didn't care that much about, and you discover you have lost something or someone valuable to you. So there is the constant element of discovering yourself—not in the time-consuming way people do in psychoanalysis, where every little act has to be analyzed and reanalyzed until the air in the room is stale. Rather, just like making love, it's a matter of being sensitive to the moment, reflecting the moment as best you can. And that is not an easy matter. You want a few general ethical principles from me? Remarks I'd even offer to a stranger? Well, then, if possible, I would say to the stranger, "Give up smoking." Because that tends to block a good deal of sensitivity in yourself. It serves the will. I used to smoke two packs a day—why? Because it served my will, particularly when it came to writing. Took me a year to learn how to begin writing again once I did give it up. Perhaps I became a better writer. My point is, anything that will enable you to get closer to yourself, good or bad . . . in other words, being close to oneself can be much more unpleasant than being at a distance from oneself. That is why most people do choose, indeed, to be a bit removed from themselves. And so often—here's the dirty little secret—that's why they smoke.CUT]

NM [But you know, CUT] I remember something else you said about getting close to yourself: [It's stuck with me. I don't even remember where you said it—you might have brought it up in conversation—but you declared: CUT] "If you dig deep enough into yourself, you're going to come out your asshole."

NM [N.M. laughs]

NM In other words, yes, there are doors, and you must open many of those doors, and the ensuing doors within doors, but every once in a while you want to be careful about what you open.

NM Well, of course, you have to be careful about certain doors. Anyone who flings everything ajar at once would be blown away. A mighty change could rage through all the rooms in your psyche. One of the most jealously self-

protective elements in human nature may be to protect oneself from one's own dark and barricaded corners.

So I don't think it's a real problem that we're going to open, by mistake, all the doors at once—we don't. We can't. What I meant by the closer you get to yourself, the closer you are to coming out of your own asshole has to do with something I'd like to attach to this discussion concerning the nature of defecation, shit, and waste. It may be worth getting into. As a small premise, think of people who are terribly prudish about evacuation. They don't want to think about it, don't talk about it, it's beneath them, they hope it is terribly far away from them. I'd say, ethically speaking, that's not a comfortable way to be. Far better that when you're sitting on the throne—parenthetically, it's interesting that we have that metaphor, "the throne," precisely for the toilet—when you're sitting on the throne, you do well to be regal about it and enjoy the sniffs of your own waste. Smell your own shit and decide for yourself if you're a little more healthy or a little more unhealthy than you thought you were the last time you sat down. That's part of being close to yourself. You take this notion that what comes out of you may be unpleasant, but it is certainly real. It can be the nearest we come to a fact. [It's like hearing your own voice unexpectedly—so often it's too shrill, too arrogant, too peremptory, too spoiled, or harsh. To the degree we can hear our own voice, we improve our relations with other people. Because if we find our own voice unpleasant at times, then if the other person starts shrieking at us, we don't have to think, "How unstable is the other." Not if we can recognize that our own voice was ugly enough to incite the response.]

That's one of the elements in a decent marriage. This being attuned and listening and paying attention to the self . . . as you were speaking, I kept thinking, "This is positively Jamesian." James would sense the tiniest shifts in perception. Now, he probably wasn't interested in smelling shit very much—not at all. That may have been his one major deficiency. [Laughter] CUT]

[A while ago, you were hammering on Revelation as something to be rejected by human experience.CUT] In your view, is

ML there any merit or value in the holy Books of the great religions, or do you think they should be seen as historical artifacts, quaint, useless curiosities?

NM No, no.

ML What is their use then?

Well, if they're seen as general principles rather than as absolute dicta, they can be of great use. The Ten Commandments—most of us do react within the framework of the those ten injunctions. The point is not to build up an inner sense of self-righteousness—"I obey the Ten Commandments, and therefore I am nearer to God." No, they are crude guides. "Do not kill." Well, yes, do not kill. Does that mean you have to piss in your pants if you have a gun in your hand and you're face-to-face with Adolf Hitler in 1941? No, you kill him. At that point, I would not consider "do not kill" an absolute command.

NM [Let's go through the Ten Commandments: Most of them are so simple they apply to 90 percent of the cases. But you have some . . . Do not commit adultery." Well, there it can become more complex. Because when people are engaged in miserable marriages, their lives are foul; their children's lives are poisoned. And at a given moment, there's an impulse to escape, to commit adultery in order to avoid doing worse things, like screaming too much at the kids. Where the Ten Commandments fall down is that there are times you have to do something deemed worse than what you're supposed to do. Because if you don't do that something worse, you're going to get into actions even more destructive, more evil, more unhappy, more toxic to others. CUT]

ML So you're not interested in jettisoning the great holy Books of the world; you just want to qualify them.

NM Not qualify. I want us to cease looking upon them slavishly. Once one becomes a peon to any part of one's mind, one is then open to the dark side of the moon, which is mass destruction.

ML [Your position is very much like Emerson's. He revered Jesus, he was interested in all the holy Books, but he certainly wasn't going to be bound by them. His own quest for his own inner self, very much like yours, precluded that.]

AM I've read Emerson but only in passing, and that for a simple reason. One, I think he's a great writer, and two, I did feel close enough to him to think, "If I study him, I could end up trying to write wonderful pieces about Emerson." My arrogance, my vanity, if you will, is that I am out on my own explorations. I've had that rare experience, probably analogous to Emerson's, of being successful enough at an early age not to worry about making a living the way other people do. In return for that blessing, the least I could do was spend my time thinking. I have had such an advantage, and it's an enormous one, and I'm aware of it. I'm happy I'm aware of it because it keeps me modest rather than vain. There were years when I was much too vain, and I have paid for that. Vanity is corrosive.

There are a few generalities you can count on—vanity is immensely dangerous. But nothing is absolute. Vanity may be terribly important for people who don't have enough of it, even as it's injurious to people who have too much. But then the notion of moderation that comes to us from the Greeks can also be stultifying. If you apply it to dangerous activities, however, it becomes interesting. What is moderation for a top-notch race-car driver? What's moderation to a libertine? Well, you don't have to pursue every last fuck that's open to you. What's the mark of moderation in a womanizer, a groper? He doesn't have to feel every woman's ass he's inclined to explore. He looks to be discriminating. When action is high, the road back to balance is discrimination.

A phrase comes to mind—I'm sure you won't like it—that, crudely speaking, applies to a lot of what you've been saying, and that's "situation ethics."

You mean: "Do the right thing." It's a maxim often used by black kids. First, what does "do the right thing" mean? The kids are talking then about situations fewer whites have considered in their full complexity. You're a drug dealer, and you're cutting your stuff, and there's a customer who,

on the one hand, is a fool—you can take him completely and give him something close to plain talcum powder. On the other hand, you can see he really needs a drug at that moment. So "do the right thing"—don't cut his stuff to a ridiculous level. Lose a little of the profit.

At every level of human existence, no matter how evil certain activities may seem to others, there is a caution present along with the ugly impulse (except, of course, for those rare occasions when the unholy impulse takes over entirely). But short of such moments, I would say that even very unpleasant people will hold back on certain occasions because we all do have this sense of "do the right thing." My basic argument is that ethics is not a system of rules—as you said, not something you can etch in stone. Ethics is a sensitivity to the moment and the thought: "This is probably better to do than that." It could even come down to calculation: You're bilking someone in a deal. But if you're going to bilk him, better not to do it in too ugly a manner, or you'll increase his desire to take advantage of others. So what's your ethos at that moment? It's to reduce ugliness in the world system—by a little.

In one of our earlier conversations, you spoke of a time in the distant future when, after some "definitive metamorphosis of existence," human vision would join God's vision—perhaps—and travel across the heavens.

When did I say that?

ML [In one of our earlier conversations.

NM [Was that toward the end of Ancient Evenings or in Of a Fire on the Moon?

ML [Elements of that were there. You were looking around the corner, so to speak; you were anticipating, rare for you, how things might possibly turn out. A "definitive metamorphosis of existence" was part of the phrase, as I recall. Human nature would shift into a completely different level; human vision would become married with God's and, I assume, would then split off from the demonic. At that point, something would happen—we would "travel across the heavens."

Well, that's apocalyptic. I do not see any way we're going to separate drastically or quickly from the Devil as well as from God.

So you would not see—

At present, I am more concerned that we do not destroy ourselves.

What would be the necessary conditions for this metamorphosis of existence to happen? What would human beings have to become?

Some of it may be obvious: more and then even more self-awareness. More freedom from Fundamentalism. (I would like to see more readiness for humans to accept the heroic demand that they stop leaning on God, stop relying on God, and start realizing that God's needs could be greater than ours, God's woes more profound than our own. God's sense of failure may be so deep as to mock our sense of failure. God, I believe, is, at present, far from fulfilling His own vision. He is mired in our corporate promotions all over the globe, our superhighways, our plastic, our threats of nuclear warfare, our heartless, arrogant, ethnic wars, our terrorism, our spread of pollution all over His environment. How can God's sorrow not be immeasurably greater than ours?)

[Before we can approach any thoughts of apocalypse, we have to become human enough, brave enough, to recognize that we cannot rely on God. CUT] Rely too much on God, and we are comparable to a tremendously selfish child who drives a parent into exhaustion, deadens the parent through endless demands. "Save me! God, please, can I have that beautiful dress I want for the high school prom? Thank you, God, deliver it to me, God." [pause] "If you don't, God, I'll be angry at you," is the underlying element in so many of the prayers. Or the abject beseechment—"God, have pity on me, I'm a poor worm."

I think we become a hint more heroic if we recognize that we do have to stand on our own. So I can feel a certain respect for atheists. I have huge disagreements with them—the first might be the absolute refusal of a majority to consider the notion of karma for even a moment. Or any kind of Hereafter—their determined intensity that there will be nothing after life. This creates its own sort of trouble. It fortifies the liberal notions that we have to take care of people we know nothing about and enter strange countries and provide them with democracy, whether they desire it or not. Needless to say, Christians have been doing the same for a long time. [END HERE]

NM [I have a tremendous distrust of what people think is the good. At any given moment, 90 percent of that is fashion. The war in Iraq is a perfect example of fashion—the bright idea that we are there to inject democracy into any country that needs it. That was a political fashion; it had no real basis in political reality. Of course, it can be done, you can always inject some warped form of democracy into a country if you have enough troops and are ready to ignore the cost.]

NM [I want to come back one more time to love and courage. Here I'm going to use Henry James—his idea of the greatest human act, one that required both love and courage, is an act of renunciation. At the heart of all his novels is an act of renunciation, and usually it's a quiet act, not even an act you take credit for.]

NM [It's suspicious in James, because James's life is a study in renunciation. I distrust authors, especially very good authors, when they lay out a full program for their characters that is covertly supporting their own work. James had too little passion to get near to people he didn't understand. He worked out an immensely elaborate and beautiful art, but it's full of renunciation. And we pay the price. If he had been greater as a writer, Americans would be that much better off. James is not much of a guide to the modern world. He's a marvelous guide when you're younger to understanding some of the subtly disproportionate things that go on in high society. He's a great guide to a very limited mountain pass that few people will ever have to traverse. But renunciation did him in. If James had had a few passionate love affairs and had been able to write about them—]

ML He saw them as antithetical. It's the life/art division. James believed that you can have a life or you can have the art, and I'm going to have the art.

NM Look, I agree, and that does not surprise me, particularly now that I'm old. Recently, I've been saying that if you want to be a serious novelist, a large element of it is monastic. It's a dull life in the daily sense.

ML That's very Jamesian.

NM You don't have a lot of fun. You have to give up the idea of fun.

ML Renunciation serves art. That was his dictum.

NM In that sense, I do agree. But there is renunciation as a working sacrifice, a temporary renunciation, and there's visceral renunciation, which can amputate a novelist's taproot.

ML He should have broken off the reservation once in a while? Gone off on a toot?

NM Yes. Once you've had a wild time or two, you can often support your imagination for a long time. In the harshest sense, you can say the trouble with Henry James is he never fucked another human.

ML I have one last question, which I think you've already answered. Your position on Jesus seems to be very similar to the position of the Muslims: They revere him as a teacher, a prophet, a guide—they do not recognize him as anything special beyond one in a long line—

NM No. I wouldn't say I have that point of view. It's possible to me that Jesus is the son of God. If God wants to inspire humankind, which is after all His Creation, why couldn't He, why wouldn't He, send a part of Himself to humankind? I can accept the miracle—miracles don't bother me. What irks me is the bric-a-brac put up to surround the miracle. So the incarnation—the Word made Flesh is something—The Word made Flesh gives me trouble. The Gospel of John makes me uneasy. I think John, more than Matthew, Mark, or Luke, created some of the unhappier aspects of the Church. The notion of the Word made Flesh can be reversed—there's the danger. The Flesh can be turned into the Word, can become injunctions, direct communication, usually from above straight down. What is totalitarianism but the Word being implanted in the Flesh?

ML But John said you have to believe Revelation, it's all there, there's no other way. Whereas Thomas said you have to look inside yourself, John said, "Forget what's inside yourself, look to the Gospels." So you'd have a natural animosity to John.

UM I do—and the Flesh was transmogrified into the Word. Most of us by now live with the Word, not the Flesh.

ML But don't you find the Gospel of John superior in its writing?

UM The writing is better, yes, which is why people love John and why, of the four, he's the most important. But he is tethered to the word that he helped to create—those loud-voiced, lying, Bible-thumping exhortationists on TV who are also ready to sweep up your dollars, dear fellow Jesus lovers, fellow servants to the Word and the Book, just send it to me here at blank-blank dot com. CUT]

1

On the Authority of the Senses by Norman Mailer with
Michael Lennon

Michael Lennon: You've spoken of the authority of the senses many times, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas or quoting Hemingway. What exactly is this authority based on? What empowers it? If God is your answer, then to complicate the question, can't we say that evil in all cultures has almost always been associated with the flesh and the senses?

Norman Mailer: My basic premise proposes that there's a different mixture of God and the Devil in every one of us. Some of that variety creates the shape of our character. You'll hear one person say about another, "He's a good guy, he's stand-up, but he sure can be a son of a bitch." In ourselves and others, we find this constant interplay of good and bad.

If we are going to talk about these matters, I think we would do well to approach them with the confidence that humans have the right to explore anything and everything—at our spiritual peril, but we do have the right. It seems to me—how to put it?—I see no reason for a divinity to put everything into a Book and expect that to be our only guide. He gave us free will. Or She gave us free will. Once again, let's leave gender out of it. If we were given free will, then the Book is the first obstacle to it.

What's the role of the senses?

I would say the senses were given to us by God. If I'm ready to go in for speculations such as these, I would even go so far as to say that mind may have been the contribution of the Devil—or, at least, more so than God. How can I justify such a remark? Animals seem to function extraordinarily well on their instincts and their senses. To a large degree, they have community—ants, bees, all the way up to primates. There is an extraordinary amount of communication we can witness in animals, and they are undeniably superior to us in one manner: They don't go around slaughtering one another in huge numbers. If, by every other mode of moral judgment, we see ourselves as superior, still we know that animals left to themselves are not going to destroy the universe. But we could. So it may

be a true question: Did the Devil invent mind? Or is this still God's domain? Or, more likely, does the search for dominance there become the field of battle?

There is no question in my mind that the Devil did enter mind. And, not being the first Creator, did His best to invade the senses as well, to corrupt the senses. But the question is sufficiently complex to assume that the senses are neither wholly God given nor Devil ridden.

But the line you quoted, which has puzzled me for decades, is "Trust the authority of the senses."

St. Thomas Aquinas said that, and Hemingway, in his way: "If it feels good, it is good." I've never read Aquinas in depth, but I was taken with the notion that the most formal of the Catholic philosophers had presented this rule of thumb. What I think it means—leave Aquinas out of it—is that we must trust the authority of the senses because that is the closest contact we have to the Creator; however, it is a most treacherous undertaking. As anyone who's ever enjoyed a drink knows, the authority of the senses on a boozy spree is exceptional. You feel so much, see so much—and that's even more true on marijuana. You trust the authority of the senses until, perhaps, they become so intense that God and the Devil seem to be there working with you full-time. We've all had the experience of an extraordinary trip on drink and/or pot, but what I know is that the end result is as often disaster as happiness. I won't pretend that every time you get drunk beyond measure nothing good will happen. It occurred to me at a certain point in my life that I had never, up to that moment, gone to bed with a woman for the first time without being drunk. Since some of the most important experiences of my life occurred that way, I can hardly wish to argue that drink serves the Devil alone. Given the rigors of modern society, it's possible we'd never get anywhere without liquor or pot.

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[You have me thinking of Blake's line: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

It's implicit in what I just said, but I think I'd be happier if the line had gone: "The road of excess can lead to wisdom." I'm not in favor of excess because I've ruined too much in just that way. Blake did have an apocalyptic mind, which he served manfully, full-time. It's one of the reasons his remarks inspire the highest flights of fancy. But on the other hand, he is seen by our modern spirit as signally impractical. CUT]

The other thing you said that gave me pause was how the Devil invades mind. On more than one occasion you have suggested that scientific thinking undercuts metaphoric, intuitive thinking, and I wonder if that is what you see as the invasion of mind by the Devil. Scientific method, logic, linear thinking is opposed to the leaps of intuition in metaphor.

Often. It seems to me our minds work on two disparate systems. One is based on the senses. Metaphor, for example, is almost impossible without being somewhat attuned to nature, to its often subtle shifts of mood. That depends so much on one's senses. But then there is another faculty of mind that can be as cold as the polar cap. Indeed, it is a readiness to repel the senses, distrust them, even calumniate them as powers of distortion. This readiness to free oneself from the senses may be exercised most by the Devil.

Almost everything I dislike in the modern world is super-rational: the corporation, the notion that we can improve upon nature, to tinker with it egregiously, dramatically, extravagantly. Nuclear bombs, as one example, came out of reason. It's not that scientists, filled with an acute sense of their own senses, brought their creative intimations to the atom bomb. On the contrary, it was an abstraction away from the senses, a pure light of mind that came to the conclusion that it was possible to make the bomb--and then, that it had to be done, not only to defeat Japan but for the furtherance of science itself.

This may be related. I'd like to talk about ~~Thomas's Gospel~~. ~~[where it's made clear that human beings have the obligation to bring forth what is within.]~~ You had better say what this particular Gospel is. Thomas's Gospel is, of course, not in the Bible but is a suppressed apocrypha, discussed most recently by Elaine Pagels. ~~CUT! In Elaine Pagels's book on the subject,~~ Thomas's Gospel ^{which} states that as human beings, we all have the obligation to "bring forth what is within." And if we do, it will save us. If you keep in what is in, repress it, whatever it is—it will destroy you.

I used to believe that entirely. I now think it to be generally true but risky. Because what does it mean to bring forth what is within? I work on the notion that there's godliness within us and diabolism as well. So to bring forth what is within you, it is necessary, very often, to send out the worst elements of yourself. Because if they stay within, they can poison you. That is much more complex than saying, "Get it out! Act it out. Be free, man! Liberate yourself." Because very often what comes out is so bad that it injures others, sometimes dreadfully. You could say that every crime of violence is a way of getting the ugliness in oneself out, acting it out, doing it. You could even advance the argument that there are people who will contain what is ugly within them—and that's their honor. It's a complex matter—often there are people who will sacrifice themselves in order not to injure others. For example, if you act out something dreadful in yourself— if, for example, the need to get falling-in-the-gutter drunk thereby intensifies the miseries of everyone in your family— it is doing nothing good for others. Or excessive gambling. Or beating children. Or entering sexual relations with them. To the degree that certain ugly emotions are acted out, others ^{can be} injured terribly by your freedom to do so. I could argue that it is often a Devil's urge you are expressing.

You have to ask yourself at a given moment, "Who is speaking within me?"

How do you answer that?

Well, I can give you one story; it's fascinated me for years. At a certain time in my life, I was feeling rocky. My third wife had decided she didn't want to go on with our

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marriage at a time when I had been hoping, "Maybe this time I can start to build a life." She was a very interesting woman but easily as difficult as myself. So when she broke it up, I didn't know where I was. And I remember one night, wandering around Brooklyn through some semi-slums—not the hard slums but some of the tougher neighborhoods a mile or two out from my house in Brooklyn—not even knowing what I was looking for, but going out, drinking in a bar, sizing up the bar, going to another bar, looking . . . this is ironic, but in those days, you actually would go to a bar and look for a woman. I think you still can, but it's been so long now since I did it that I can no longer speak with authority. Anyway, I found no woman. I went into an all-night diner—because I realized I was hungry, not only drunk but hungry—and ordered a doughnut and coffee, finished it. Then a voice spoke to me. I think it's one of the very few times I felt God was speaking to me. Now, of course, one can be dead wrong. I go back to Kierkegaard—just when you think you're being saintly, you're being evil; when you think you're being evil, you might be fulfilling or abetting God's will at that point. In any event, this voice spoke to me and said, "Leave without paying."

It was a minor sum—twenty-five cents for coffee and a doughnut in those days. I was aghast, because I'd been brought up properly. One thing you didn't do was steal. And never from strangers! How awful! I said, "I can't do it." And the voice—it was most amused—said, "Go ahead and do it," quietly, firmly, laughing at me. So I got up, slipped out of the restaurant, and didn't pay the quarter. And I thought about this endlessly. If it was God . . . as I said, this was the closest I ever came to trusting the authority of my senses. My senses told me this was a divine voice, not a diabolical one. It seemed to me that I was so locked into petty injunctions on how to behave, that on the one hand I wanted to be a wild man, yet I couldn't even steal a cup of coffee. To this day, I think it was God's amusement to say, "You little prig. Just walk out of there. Don't pay for the coffee. They'll survive, and this'll be good for you."

Now, I've thought about this often because it's a perfect example of how difficult it is for us to know at a given moment whether we're near to God or to Satan, which is why Fundamentalists can drive you up the wall—their sense of certainty is the most misleading element in their lives. It demands, intellectually speaking, spiritually

speaking, that one must remain at a fixed level of mediocrity. [It's a great irony, because many of them who are good Christians, or Orthodox Jews, are compassionate. I don't know much about Islam, but I'm sure the same is true there. You can have fine people, wonderful people, Fundamentalists full of compassion . . . can say in passing, if God was ever going to mingle in our affairs, Christ is more than a metaphor. Compassion is probably the ~~best~~ ^{finest} emotion we humans can have. When tears come to our eyes for the sorrow of someone else, that may be as close as we get to reaching the best element in ourselves. But, there again, it's difficult to know how pure any moment of compassion is. And any false variety of it can be toxic. When it is manufactured by constant adjurations applied to the daily habits of Fundamentalists, compassion can become the opposite of itself, and turn into an instrument for power. "Follow me because I feel compassion for you."

Speaking crudely, if half the Fundamentalists in the world are truly compassionate, the other half are on an egregious power-trip. ~~Only~~

You know, this always stops me. I try to think how you would translate your metaphysics, your cosmology, into an ethical system. It's not just the Fundamentalists. Most religious systems say: "OK, we have the theology, now let us show you how that translates into ethics." But what you tell me over and over again is, "We can't be sure." It would be very difficult to construct an ethical system by which to live one's life based on your scheme of beliefs. Have you thought of that?

I accept your point. I do search for an ethic I can believe in. And that is where I go back to trusting the authority of my senses. They can also be—what's the word I'm looking for?—traded. To the degree that the Devil may affect our senses, they can become a perfect place ~~for Him~~ to get to us. That would be the Devil's aim exactly—to enter our senses, make us feel we are having a godly emotion, when in fact we are being inspired by the Devil.

So I hope I never construct an ethic by offering a few bones. The worst to be said about Fundamentalism is that it

reduces people to the reflexes of a good dog. If a good dog is upset, give it a treat.

Fundamentalism is comfortable.

It's comfortable, but it is limiting. I keep going back to Kierkegaard, who, for my money, was probably the most profound Christian. He searched into the complexity of our relation not only to divinity but to diabolism as well. He knew that we must take nothing for granted in the moral Firmament. We cannot kneel forever before the neon sign that purports to be God's mystery: "Don't ask, just obey!" ~~[we can, of course, for the sake of this argument, pay, another visit to the subject of Fundamentalism. After all,~~ a good many Fundamentalists do function with vigor. Their lives have been simplified. They don't worry over questions that are debilitating. They function very well—at their medium level. No great writer ever came out of Fundamentalism, nor any great scientist. To my knowledge, very few talented actors came out of Fundamentalism—or stayed with it for long. Never a genius of any kind, not since Augustine and Aquinas.

Skinner

Levinson → So perhaps Fundamentalism is for the less daring, the less bold, the less gifted? But aren't you living on an ethical razor's edge, listening to inner voices to find the right word? That's not something everyone can emulate. Yes, people want to live in such a way that they will feel secure. But there may be no such security available. Right now, parenthetically, we are living in a time where we have to wonder if we will even see the end of the twenty-first century. Or will we destroy ourselves? In that sense, directly, there is no spiritual security.

Heiler

So, ~~the~~ Fundamentalists, beneath everything else, feel the same fears that existential thinkers suffer—that the whole thing can come to an end. Fundamentalists look to alleviate that fear by way of what I would call their desperate belief that it's "God's will" and at the end they will be transported to Heaven. Well, once again, this supposes that God is All-Good and All-Powerful and will carry the righteous right up there. Of course, that offers nothing to the idiocies of human history, particularly that the more we develop as humans, the worse we are able to treat one another. Why? Because we now have the power to

(Comparably)

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destroy one another at higher, more unfeeling levels. This can be epitomized again and again by repeating the familiar example I take from the concentration camps—telling poor wretches that they're going to have a shower to get rid of lice, and instead they die with a curse in their hearts. That's ~~more~~ hideous, in a certain sense, ~~than~~ dropping a bomb on one hundred thousand people—on people you know nothing about. And yet you have Fundamentalists carrying on about abortion, speaking of it as thwarting God's will. What does it have to do with God's will if you kill a thousand people in one minute with gas? Or destroy hundreds of thousands in an instant of atomic man-made lightning from the sky? What does that do to God's will?

We might assume that God, like us, is doing the best that can be done under the circumstances. God is our Creator. God put us here. We are God's artistic vision, we are God's children, if you will, and it's not a good parent who looks always to control the child. The mark of a good parent is that he or she can take joy in the moment when a developing child begins to outstrip the parent. God is immensely powerful but is not All-Powerful. God is powerful enough to give us lightning and thunder and extraordinary sunsets, incredible moments where we appreciate God's sense of beauty. But if God is All-Powerful, then how can you begin to explain the monstrosities of modern history? There are theological arguments by great theologians that these horrors are to test us. But this reduces our concept of God to a stage director who says, "Let the actors follow the script. Do not give them access to the playwright."

In one of our earlier conversations, you said humans were created by someone or something not unlike ourselves. So we are then, in some way, created in the image of God?

Yes. I believe that.

Doesn't that suggest we are more good than evil?

[Potentially more good. When a good man and a good woman have a child, there's every reason to believe that child will be a good person. But it's not guaranteed. Good parents can have evil children.

Lawson If we're created in God's image and we're potentially good but then choose evil, perhaps we were evil all along.

Look at your phrase—"evil all along." If, at Creation, the Devil was present and entered us as well, then what we speak of as original sin can be seen as God's obligatory collaboration with the Devil. We were born good and evil. Fifty-fifty?

~~The point is, CUE~~ Whether it's fifty-fifty, sixty-forty, seventy-thirty, the odds change in each of us because there's an intense war that goes on forever, not only between God and the Devil but—I've said this before—God and the Devil as they war within us. We make our own bargains with Them. God and the Devil do not have the resources to be in complete control of us all the time. It isn't as if we walk through a normal day, and there's God on one shoulder and the Devil on the other—not at all. They come to us when we attract their attention, because it affects Their interest as well as ours.

What I use as the notion behind these assumptions that divine energy is analogous to human energy—~~it is not~~ *that it is* inexhaustible. God and the Devil are each obliged to manage their own economies of energy, which is to say that they will give more attention to certain elements of human behavior than to others. Very often, they withdraw from certain people. Too much is being given, too little is coming back.

Given this supposition, I feel more ready to make an approach to the question of ethics. It must be obvious in all I've said so far that I not only am an existentialist but would go so far as to say that we do not know our nature. We only find out about ourselves as we proceed through life. And as we do, we open more questions.

Jean Malaguais once made a splendid remark—at least for me—during the course of a lecture. He was a brilliant lecturer, and in the middle of a verbal flight—this was at the New School—some kid said bitterly, "You never give us answers. You only pose questions." And Jean stopped in the full flight of his rhetoric and replied, "There are no answers. There are only questions."

The point is that the purpose of life may be to find higher and better questions. Why? Because what I believe—this is wholly speculative but important to me—is that we are here as God's work, here to influence His future as well as ours. We are God's expression, and not all artworks are successful. [But we are here because God has a vision of existence that is at odds with other visions of existence in the universe. There we get into the real

question of cosmic hegemonies. There may be a majordomo at the core, maybe not. There may be gods--the heavens may be analogous to pagan times. These gods are fighting for dominance over one another.

So we come back once more to "Where is the ethic?" And again I return to trusting the authority of our senses. What now do I mean by that? Isn't it true that as we free ourselves of false conceptions of what life might be, as we free ourselves of the maxims and injunctions other people have put into us from childhood, as we come to have a better sense of "whatever I am, I am beginning to have my own ideas," you can also develop some instinct that one is doing the right thing or one is not. Or, all too often, one is not doing much. As we get older, "Not much at all" can take over most of our lives. If I am doing a crossword puzzle, there is no high motive necessarily involved. Instead, the activity might be to some most modest degree on the side of evil--I'm consuming time that could be spent in better ways. Or, to the contrary, I might be preparing my system to get ready for something worthwhile. It's not a large question: I do the crossword puzzle, and I don't think about it as good or evil. And I don't think of myself as good or evil so much as probably leaning slightly in the right direction or the wrong one when it comes down to how I am exercising my time.

So if you ask where the ethic is at any moment, it can be no more than that one is the resultant of all the forces that are in you as that vector confronts all the forces supporting you and opposing you. It's as if we live in a triangular relationship with God and the Devil, trying to sense the best thing to do at a given moment, be it a good thing or a bad thing. Let me go back to what might have been my lone visitation from the Lord. What God might have been trying to tell me was, "Get over this notion of good, right, proper. Because very often when you're moving in a direction you think improper, you might be helping Me more than when you're trying to be proper. Because when you're trying to be proper, you could be poisoning yourself with frustrated annoyance that makes you a colder person and of less use to Me." ~~CUT~~

What I'm offering to people as an ethic is to have the honor to live with confusion. Live in the depths of confusion with the knowledge back of that, the certainty back of that-- or the belief, the hope, the faith, whatever you wish to call it--that there is a purpose to it all, that

it is not absurd, that we are all engaged in a vast cosmic war and God needs us. That doesn't mean we can help God by establishing a set of principles to live by. We can't. Why not? Because the principles vary. The cruelest obstacle to creating one's own ethic is that no principle is incorruptible. Indeed, to cleave to a principle is to corrupt oneself. To shift from one principle to another can, however, be promiscuous. Life is not simple. Ethics are almost incomprehensible, but they exist. There is a substratum of moderate, quiet, good feeling. Generally, if I'm doing things in such a way that the sum of all my actions at the moment seems to be feasible and responsible and decent, that certainly gives me a better feeling than if I am uneasy, dissatisfied with myself, and not liking myself.

[Now, obviously, there is room for error. We all know about vanity. There are people who, when they like themselves, are dangerous. When they think they are extraordinary and fabulous, they can be awful. CUT]

So it isn't so much that you have no ethical system but one that cannot be abstracted nor carved on tablets for people to carry around and consult whenever they have to make a decision. Life is always more complicated than any rule that can be laid down.

What I'm asking for.... This is an odd analogy, but not entirely. There are certain people who worship sex, good sex. I might be one of them. What I've noticed about good sex, when it's really good, is the extreme sensitivity with which you proceed. At a given moment, it's a creative dance. There is such a thing as a pure act of love when every moment is distinctive and lovely and fine. That does happen. For most people, it happens so rarely that they remember it—and then remember it and remember it. A sense of perfection does live in our concept of sex.

In the same way, sometimes, for short periods in our lives, I think there's an analogous sense of perfection to all sorts of basic emotions—in love, in nurture, in caring for people, in grieving, in mourning. It's very hard to mourn, mourn openly and honestly. Mourning is an element in people's lives that can be duplicitous, even ugly. Take a wife who's been married to a man for forty years—and in her mourning, what if she detects a secret spot of glee? "That

selfish bastard is finally gone." So mourning can be shocking for people because they discover sides of themselves they never knew existed—or the reverse. [Sometimes people die whom you thought you didn't care that much about, and you discover you have lost something or someone valuable to you. So there is the constant element of discovering yourself—not in the time-consuming way people do in psychoanalysis, where every little act has to be analyzed and reanalyzed until the air in the room is stale. Rather, just like making love, it's a matter of being sensitive to the moment, reflecting the moment as best you can. And that is not an easy matter. You want a few general ethical principles from me? Remarks I'd even offer to a stranger? Well, then, if possible, I would say to the stranger, "Give up smoking." Because that tends to block a good deal of sensitivity in yourself. It serves the will. I used to smoke two packs a day— why? Because it served my will, particularly when it came to writing. Took me a year to learn how to begin writing again once I did give it up. Perhaps I became a better writer. My point is, anything that will enable you to get closer to yourself, good or bad . . . in other words, being close to oneself can be much more unpleasant than being at a distance from oneself. That is why most people do choose, indeed, to be a bit removed from themselves. And so often—here's the dirty little secret—that's why they smoke.CUT]

[But you know,CUT] I remember something else you said about getting close to yourself: [It's stuck with me. I don't even remember where you said it—you might have brought it up in conversation—but you declared: CUT] "If you dig deep enough into yourself, you're going to come out your asshole."

[N.M. laughs]

In other words, yes, there are doors, and you must open many of those doors, and the ensuing doors within doors, but every once in a while you want to be careful about what you open.

Well, of course, you have to be careful about certain doors. Anyone who flings everything ajar at once would be blown away. A mighty change could rage through all the rooms in your psyche. One of the most jealously self-

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protective elements in human nature may be to protect oneself from one's own dark and barricaded corners.

So I don't think it's a real problem that we're going to open, by mistake, all the doors at once—we don't. We can't. What I meant by the closer you get to yourself, the closer you are to coming out of your own asshole has to do with something I'd like to attach to this discussion concerning the nature of defecation, shit, and waste. It may be worth getting into. As a small premise, think of people who are terribly prudish about evacuation. They don't want to think about it, don't talk about it, it's beneath them, they hope it is terribly far away from them. I'd say, ethically speaking, that's not a comfortable way to be. Far better that when you're sitting on the throne—parenthetically, it's interesting that we have that metaphor, "the throne," precisely for the toilet—when you're sitting on the throne, you do well to be regal about it and enjoy the sniffs of your own waste. Smell your own shit and decide for yourself if you're a little more healthy or a little more unhealthy than you thought you were the last time you sat down. That's part of being close to yourself. You take this notion that what comes out of you may be unpleasant, but it is certainly real. It can be the nearest we come to a fact. [It's like hearing your own voice unexpectedly—so often it's too shrill, too arrogant, too peremptory, too spoiled, or harsh. To the degree we can hear our own voice, we improve our relations with other people. Because if we find our own voice unpleasant at times, then if the other person starts shrieking at us, we don't have to think, "How unstable is the other." Not if we can recognize that our own voice was ugly enough to incite the response.]

That's one of the elements in a decent marriage. This being attuned and listening and paying attention to the self . . . as you were speaking, I kept thinking, "This is positively Jamesian." James would sense the tiniest shifts in perception. Now, he probably wasn't interested in smelling shit very much—not at all. That may have been his one major deficiency. [Laughter] CUT]

[A while ago, you were hammering on Revelation as something to be rejected by human experience.CUT] In your view, is

there any merit or value in the holy Books of the great religions, or do you think they should be seen as historical artifacts, quaint, useless curiosities?

No, no.

What is their use then?

Well, if they're seen as general principles rather than as absolute dicta, they can be of great use. The Ten Commandments--most of us do react within the framework of the those ten injunctions. The point is not to build up an inner sense of self-righteousness--"I obey the Ten Commandments, and therefore I am nearer to God." No, they are crude guides. "Do not kill." Well, yes, do not kill. Does that mean you have to piss in your pants if you have a gun in your hand and you're face-to-face with Adolf Hitler in 1941? No, you kill him. At that point, I would not consider "do not kill" an absolute command.

[Let's go through the Ten Commandments: Most of them are so simple they apply to 90 percent of the cases. But you have some . . . Do not commit adultery." Well, there it can become more complex. Because when people are engaged in miserable marriages, their lives are foul; their children's lives are poisoned. And at a given moment, there's an impulse to escape, to commit adultery in order to avoid doing worse things, like screaming too much at the kids. Where the Ten Commandments fall down is that there are times you have to do something deemed worse than what you're supposed to do. Because if you don't do that something worse, you're going to get into actions even more destructive, more evil, more unhappy, more toxic to others.CUT]

So you're not interested in jettisoning the great holy Books of the world; you just want to qualify them.

Not qualify. I want us to cease looking upon them slavishly. Once one becomes a peon to any part of one's mind, one is then open to the dark side of the moon, which is mass destruction.

[Your position is very much like Emerson's. He revered Jesus, he was interested in all the holy Books, but he certainly wasn't going to be bound by them. His own quest for his own inner self, very much like yours, precluded that.

I've read Emerson but only in passing, and that for a simple reason. One, I think he's a great writer, and two, I did feel close enough to him to think, "If I study him, I could end up trying to write wonderful pieces about Emerson." My arrogance, my vanity, if you will, is that I am out on my own explorations. I've had that rare experience, probably analogous to Emerson's, of being successful enough at an early age not to worry about making a living the way other people do. In return for that blessing, the least I could do was spend my time thinking. I have had such an advantage, and it's an enormous one, and I'm aware of it. I'm happy I'm aware of it because it keeps me modest rather than vain. There were years when I was much too vain, and I have paid for that. Vanity is corrosive.

There are a few generalities you can count on—vanity is immensely dangerous. But nothing is absolute. Vanity may be terribly important for people who don't have enough of it, even as it's injurious to people who have too much. But then the notion of moderation that comes to us from the Greeks can also be stultifying. If you apply it to dangerous activities, however, it becomes interesting. What is moderation for a top-notch race-car driver? What's moderation to a libertine? Well, you don't have to pursue every last fuck that's open to you. What's the mark of moderation in a womanizer, a groper? He doesn't have to feel every woman's ass he's inclined to explore. He looks to be discriminating. When action is high, the road back to balance is discrimination.

A phrase comes to mind—I'm sure you won't like it—that, crudely speaking, applies to a lot of what you've been saying, and that's "situation ethics."

You mean: "Do the right thing." It's a maxim often used by black kids. First, what does "do the right thing" mean? The kids are talking then about situations fewer whites have considered in their full complexity. You're a drug dealer, and you're cutting your stuff, and there's a customer who,

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on the one hand, is a fool—you can take him completely and give him something close to plain talcum powder. On the other hand, you can see he really needs a drug at that moment. So "do the right thing"—don't cut his stuff to a ridiculous level. Lose a little of the profit.

At every level of human existence, no matter how evil certain activities may seem to others, there is a caution present along with the ugly impulse (except, of course, for those rare occasions when the unholy impulse takes over entirely). But short of such moments, I would say that even very unpleasant people will hold back on certain occasions because we all do have this sense of "do the right thing." My basic argument is that ethics is not a system of rules—as you said, not something you can etch in stone. Ethics is a sensitivity to the moment and the thought: "This is probably better to do than that." It could even come down to calculation: You're bilking someone in a deal. But if you're going to bilk him, better not to do it in too ugly a manner, or you'll increase his desire to take advantage of others. So what's your ethos at that moment? It's to reduce ugliness in the world system-by a little.

In one of our earlier conversations, you spoke of a time in the distant future when, after some "definitive metamorphosis of existence," human vision would join God's vision—perhaps—and travel across the heavens. When did I say that?

In one of our earlier conversations.

Was that toward the end of Ancient Evenings or in Of a Fire on the Moon?

Elements of that were there. You were looking around the corner, so to speak; you were anticipating, rare for you, how things might possibly turn out. A "definitive metamorphosis of existence" was part of the phrase, as I recall. Human nature would shift into a completely different level; human vision would become married with God's and, I assume, would then split off from the demonic. At that point, something would happen—we would "travel across the heavens."

Well, that's apocalyptic. I do not see any way we're going to separate drastically or quickly from the Devil as well as from God.

So you would not see—

At present, I am more concerned that we do not destroy ourselves.

What would be the necessary conditions for this metamorphosis of existence to happen? What would human beings have to become?

Some of it may be obvious: more and then even more self-awareness. More freedom from Fundamentalism. [I would like to see more readiness for humans to accept the heroic demand that they stop leaning on God, stop relying on God, and start realizing that God's needs could be greater than ours, God's woes more profound than our own. God's sense of failure may be so deep as to mock our sense of failure. God, I believe, is, at present, far from fulfilling His own vision. He is mired in our corporate promotions all over the globe, our superhighways, our plastic, our threats of nuclear warfare, our heartless, arrogant, ethnic wars, our terrorism, our spread of pollution all over His environment. How can God's sorrow not be immeasurably greater than ours?

[Before we can approach any thoughts of apocalypse, we have to become human enough, brave enough, to recognize that we cannot rely on God. CUT] Rely too much on God, and we are comparable to a tremendously selfish child who drives a parent into exhaustion, deadens the parent through endless demands. "Save me! God, please, can I have that beautiful dress I want for the high school prom? Thank you, God, deliver it to me, God." [pause] "If you don't, God, I'll be angry at you," is the underlying element in so many of the prayers. Or the abject beseechment—"God, have pity on me, I'm a poor worm."

I think we become a hint more heroic if we recognize that we do have to stand on our own. So I can feel a certain respect for atheists. I have huge disagreements with them—the first might be the absolute refusal of a majority to consider the notion of karma for even a moment. Or any kind of Hereafter—their determined intensity that there will be nothing after life. This creates its own sort of trouble. It fortifies the liberal notions that we have to take care of people we know nothing about and enter strange countries and provide them with democracy, whether they desire it or not. Needless to say, Christians have been doing the same for a long time. [END HERE]

[I have a tremendous distrust of what people think is the good. At any given moment, 90 percent of that is fashion. The war in Iraq is a perfect example of fashion—the bright idea that we are there to inject democracy into any country that needs it. That was a political fashion; it had no real basis in political reality. Of course, it can be done, you can always inject some warped form of democracy into a country if you have enough troops and are ready to ignore the cost.

I want to come back one more time to love and courage. Here I'm going to use Henry James—his idea of the greatest human act, one that required both love and courage, is an act of renunciation. At the heart of all his novels is an act of renunciation, and usually it's a quiet act, not even an act you take credit for.

It's suspicious in James, because James's life is a study in renunciation. I distrust authors, especially very good authors, when they lay out a full program for their characters that is covertly supporting their own work. James had too little passion to get near to people he didn't understand. He worked out an immensely elaborate and beautiful art, but it's full of renunciation. And we pay the price. If he had been greater as a writer, Americans would be that much better off. James is not much of a guide to the modern world. He's a marvelous guide when you're younger to understanding some of the subtly disproportionate things that go on in high society. He's a great guide to a very limited mountain pass that few people will ever have to traverse. But renunciation did him in. If James had had a few passionate love affairs and had been able to write about them—

He saw them as antithetical. It's the life/art division. James believed that you can have a life or you can have the art, and I'm going to have the art.

Look, I agree, and that does not surprise me, particularly now that I'm old. Recently, I've been saying that if you want to be a serious novelist, a large element of it is monastic. It's a dull life in the daily sense.

That's very Jamesian.

You don't have a lot of fun. You have to give up the idea of fun.

Renunciation serves art. That was his dictum.

In that sense, I do agree. But there is renunciation as a working sacrifice, a temporary renunciation, and there's visceral renunciation, which can amputate a novelist's taproot.

He should have broken off the reservation once in a while? Gone off on a toot?

Yes. Once you've had a wild time or two, you can often support your imagination for a long time. In the harshest sense, you can say the trouble with Henry James is he never fucked another human.

I have one last question, which I think you've already answered. Your position on Jesus seems to be very similar to the position of the Muslims: They revere him as a teacher, a prophet, a guide—they do not recognize him as anything special beyond one in a long line—

No. I wouldn't say I have that point of view. It's possible to me that Jesus is the son of God. If God wants to inspire humankind, which is after all His Creation, why couldn't He, why wouldn't He, send a part of Himself to humankind? I can accept the miracle—miracles don't bother me. What irks me is the bric-a-brac put up to surround the miracle. So the incarnation—the Word made Flesh is something—The Word made Flesh gives me trouble. The Gospel of John makes me uneasy. I think John, more than Matthew, Mark, or Luke, created some of the unhappier aspects of the Church. The notion of the Word made Flesh can be reversed—there's the danger. The Flesh can be turned into the Word, can become injunctions, direct communication, usually from above straight down. What is totalitarianism but the Word being implanted in the Flesh?

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But John said you have to believe Revelation, it's all there, there's no other way. Whereas Thomas said you have to look inside yourself, John said, "Forget what's inside yourself, look to the Gospels." So you'd have a natural animosity to John.

I do—and the Flesh was transmogrified into the Word. Most of us by now live with the Word, not the Flesh.

But don't you find the Gospel of John superior in its writing?

The writing is better, yes, which is why people love John and why, of the four, he's the most important. But he is tethered to the word that he helped to create—those loud-voiced, lying, Bible-thumping exhortationists on TV who are also ready to sweep up your dollars, dear fellow Jesus lovers, fellow servants to the Word and the Book, just send it to me here at blank-blank dot com. CUT]