

Third

LOOKING TOWARD AN ETHICS

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

NORMAN MAILER: All right. My basic premise which I'll look to return to again and again, proposes that God and the Devil are both in us, are now part of us. If we were created by God eons ago, soon after, or long after—we can have no idea when—the Devil entered the relationship. By now, I would suspect there's a mixture of God and the devil in every one of us. In different ways. Some of that variety will create the form 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 immense interplay of good and bad.

Now, the organized religions, particularly the fundamentalists, have preempted the prevailing public notion of God and the Devil. They refer everything to the Book. I would even say that the virtual reality of video games was conceived in the abstract a couple of thousand years ago by those committees, those two incredible committees, who first put together the Old Testament and then the New Testament. They set up the parameters: this is good, that is evil—just look to the Book. Always refer to the Book.

This may sound arrogant, but if we are going to talk about these matters, I think we have to approach them with the confidence that humans have the right to explore

anything and everything—at our 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 sole reference and only guide. He gave us free will. Or She gave us free will. Let's leave gender out of it—God is beyond gender. If we were given free will, then the Book is the first obstacle to free will. It's destructive of free will.

ML: What's the role of the senses?

NM: I haven't gotten there. . . The point is that we're a complex mix, each of us, of God and the Devil. So when you come to the senses, a huge question presents itself.

I would say the senses were certainly given to us by God. I would even go so far as to say, if I'm ready to go in for speculations such as these, that mind may have been the contribution of the Devil more than God. How can I justify such a remark? Animals seem to function extraordinarily well on instinct and their senses. And to a large degree they have community—ants, bees, all the way up to dogs and primates. There is an extraordinary amount of communication we can witness in animals and they are undeniably superior to us in one way. They don't go around slaughtering each other in huge exercises of massacre. In every other moral way, we see ourselves as superior, but for this—animals left to themselves are never going to destroy the universe. So, it may be a true question: Did the Devil invent mind? Or is this still God's domain? Or, most probably, does it belong to both of them?

There's no question in my mind that the Devil did enter mind. And not being the first Creator, did his or her best—again, let's avoid gender; I don't want to say "its," so let's say "his" for convenience—did his best to invade the senses as well. To corrupt the senses. So, we're back in fundamentalism, which always sees sex as a corruption of the

senses invented by the devil. The question has to be more complex than any of us can resolve, but the key may be this: never assume that the senses are wholly God-given or Devil-ridden.

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

NM: 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 pondered that rule of thumb. I never explored it. At this moment I might wish I had in order to give more of an answer.

But what I think it means—leave Aquinas out of it—is that we must trust the authority of the senses because that that is the closest contact we have to the Creator. However, it is a most dangerous remark. 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 ends as often in 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 drink, without liquor, or pot.

ML: So it makes me think of Blake's line—and it makes me wonder how you'd respond to: "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

NM: It's implicit in what I just said, but I think I'd be happier if it had gone: "the road of excess might lead at times, rare times, to wisdom." I'm not in favor of excess because I've ruined too much of myself in just that way. Blake did have an apocalyptic mind that 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 impractical.

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: Yes—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, at a minimum, some decent sense of the poetic. One is somewhat attuned, at the least, to nature, to mood, the often subtle impost of change at a given moment. That depends so much on one's senses. But then there's the other faculty of mind and that can be as cold as the polar cap. Indeed, it's a readiness to repel the senses, distrust them, see them as powers of distortion. That readiness to free oneself from the senses may belong much more to the Devil.

Almost everything I dislike in the modern world is super-rational: the corporation, the notion we can improve upon nature, the readiness to tinker with it egregiously, dramatically, extravagantly. Nuclear bombs are one example. All this came out of reason. It's not that a scientist filled with an acute sense of his or her own senses brought those intimations to the atom bomb. On the contrary. It was an abstraction from the senses, pure flights of mind that came to the conclusion that it was possible to do, and then, that it had to be done. It was the furtherance of science, after all.

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.

NM: You had better say what this particular gospel is.

ML: Yes. Thomas's Gospel is, of course, not in the canon, but is a suppressed gospel, discussed most recently by Elaine Pagels. In her book, [TITLE TK] 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 is generally true, but risky. Because what does it mean to bring forth what is within you? 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 expel 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 was 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. To the degree that certain things are done, others are injured terribly by your freedom. I could argue that it is often the devil's urge to get you to act it out.

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

ML: How do you answer that?

NM: Well, I'll give you one story: I don't know if I told it to you already. It's fascinated me for years. At a certain time in my life I was getting pretty rocky. My third wife had decided she didn't want to go on with the marriage and I had been thinking, "Finally, this may be the 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 just didn't know where I was. And I remember one night wandering around Brooklyn in the 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 they still do, but it's been so long now since I did it that I can't speak with authority. Anyway, found nothing. I went into an all-night diner—because I realized I was hungry, not only drunk but hungry—and ordered a donut 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 donut in those days. I was aghast. Because I'd been brought up properly. One thing you never did was steal from strangers. How awful! I said, "I can't do it." And the voice—it was very much amused—said, "Go ahead and do it." Quietly, firmly, amused 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 and 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 drive me up the wall—constantly, dependably, predictably. To me, that certainty they have is the single most misleading element in their lives. It demands, intellectually speaking, spiritually speaking, that one must remain at a level of mediocrity, never attaining anything deep. 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 but they attach that tenderness—which as far as I'm concerned is godly, is, if you will, Christly—I can say in passing if God was ever going to mingle in our affairs, Christ is more than a metaphor. Christ may be truly the son of God. I don't pretend to know the answer to that but I don't scoff at it. In any event, with or without the presence of Christ, compassion is probably the 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 finest element in ourselves. But, there again, it's difficult to know how pure any moment of compassion is. And when it is manufactured, pressed, put, and forced into the scriptures and into the life habits, the daily habits of fundamentalists of any kind, it becomes an instrument for power. It becomes the opposite of itself. It turns compassion inside-out.

So you can have—speaking crudely, if half the fundamentalists in the world are truly compassionate, the other half are using it for an egregious power-trip. And the devil is immensely present in all of this.

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 cosmology. Have you thought of that?"

NM: I think your point is excellent. 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. They too—it's a perfect place for the Devil to set in.

They too. To the degree that the Devil may affect our senses, it's a perfect place for the devil to get to us. That would be the Devil's aim exactly—to enter our senses, make us feel we're having a godly emotion when in fact, we're having an emotion controlled by the Devil—warped to a degree, distorted from the point.

Nonetheless, the toughest thing in my theology—if I dare to call it "my theology." Let's say my ideas, my religious ideas—the toughest single thing in it is I don't have any bones to offer. The worst that can 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 bone.

ML: It's comfortable.

NM: It's comfortable, but it's immensely limiting. I keep going back to Kierkegaard, who, for my money, was probably the greatest Christian. If I wanted to name a Christian saint, it would be Kierkegaard. He not only knew the complexity of our relations to divinity but to the diabolical system as well. He knew. Take nothing for granted in the cosmos. We cannot sup forever on the pabulum that is God's mystery.

That doesn't mean you can't function with energy, but it's not always routine to count on it. In contrast, a great many people who are fundamentalists do function with vigor because their lives have been simplified. They don't worry over questions that may be debilitating. They function very well—at a median level. No great writer ever came out of fundamentalism. Nor any great scientist. To my knowledge, no great actor came out of fundamentalism—or stayed with it for long. Never a genius of any kind, not since Augustine and Aquinas.

ML: 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.

NM: Well, I don't know that that's a social problem until we get to that point where people wish to live in such a way that they do not always look for more security. Because there may be no security in existence. Right now, parenthetically, we're living in a time where we wonder if we'll ever see the end of the 21st century. Or, will we destroy ourselves? In that sense, directly, there's no security. No spiritual security whatsoever.

Of course, there's no real security for the fundamentalists either. Under everything, they have the same fears that existential thinkers suffer. Precisely that the whole thing can come to an end. Fundamentalists suffer the desperate belief that it's "God's will." Well, that depends on the notion—and I go back to real fundamentals here—this supposes God is all good and all powerful—which to me is an oxymoron. If God is all-good, how explain the idiocies of human history, particularly that the more we develop as humans, the worse we can treat one another. Why? Because we now have the power to destroy each other at higher and more extensive levels. More unfeeling levels. Epitomized by the concentration camps. Telling poor wretches that they're going to have a shower to get rid of lice—and instead they're given gas. They are even betrayed at the very last moment. 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 and 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 lightning from the sky? And in no way is that God's lightning. What does that do to God's will?

We might assume that God, like us, is doing what 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 children. The mark of a good parent is they can take joy in the moment that the child begins to outstrip the parent to a degree. It could even be that—well, this is a very far-fetched thought, so I won't try to support it, I'll just suggest it in passing—it could even be that God entered into relations with the devil because God needed another divinity who could produce things in human beings that He could not.

ML: Say that again?

NM: Known as marrying up. In other words, God's not all-powerful. God is a creator. God is immensely creative. 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 narcissistic form—now God is a stage director who says, "I'll let the actors improvise for a while to see if they get nearer to the role." Do you follow me on that? A heartless stage director.

ML: Yes. It's making me think a lot. What you said earlier. . .

NM: I want to get back, sooner or later, to the question about ethics—I think we can do it bit by bit

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

NM: Yes. I believe that.

ML: And the image of good? Doesn't that argue that we're more good than evil?

NM: Potentially more good than evil. Potentially good. A good man and a good woman have a child, and there's every reason to believe that child will be a good person. It's not altogether guaranteed, as we know. Good parents can have evil children.

ML: If the children turn out. . . if we're created in God's image and we're potentially good, but if we choose evil, then perhaps we were evil all along. If we were good all along, then eventually. . .

NM Look, look, look—not evil all along, obviously not. If at the creation the Devil was present—at the creation of humans, that is—and entered us as well, then what we speak of as original sin—God's obligatory collaboration with the Devil—we were born good and evil.

ML: Fifty-fifty?

NM: Who knows? Who would presume to say? The point is, whether it's 50-50, 60-40, 70-30, the odds change. The odds change 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 are 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. Let me put it this way: 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, not at all. They come to us when we attract their attention because it affects Their interest as well as ours.

ML: But if it's not 50-50, I have to assume it's 50-50—as a working principle. . .

NM: Assume 50-50 in the average person on the average quiet day. Habit, by the way, is another element. It probably takes over most of the psyche for uncharged decisions.

What I use as the notion behind these other notions is that divine energy is analogous to human energy—it's not inexhaustible. God and the Devil are each managing economies of energy, if you will, which is to say they will put more into certain elements of human behavior than others. Very often they withdraw from certain people. It is no longer worth it to Them. Too much is going in, too little is coming back from a person at least in terms of what They are looking for.

Given this as my supposition, I feel a little more ready to make an approach to the question of ethics. It's obvious in all I've said so far that I'm not only an existentialist, I'm probably more existential than most. None of the existentialists I know anything about would pursue it so far as to say that we simply do not know the nature of our nature. We only find out more about ourselves as we proceed through life. And as we do, we also 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 us 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 higher and better and better questions. Why? Because what I believe—this is wholly speculative but very important to me—is that we are here as God's artwork, there 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. In other words, God is not THE GOD who is over everything—there may not be such a God. There we get into the real question of cosmic existence. There may be some major-domo at the core—there may not be. There may be gods—we may be back in pagan times and these gods are all fighting for dominance over one another. And God's vision can be polluted, or distorted, or warped by the Devil. He would just as soon take over God's creation and pursue his or her vision. It's possible the Devil wishes to destroy both God and our creation altogether. Start over afresh. All these questions are so large that as I pursue my answers—one has to go further and further. You can't hold back and say, "well, I draw the line here." We have the right to speculate beyond speculation.

So, given that, we come back once more to "where is the ethic?" And again we come back to trusting the authority of your senses. What can I mean by that now? 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 and ukases other people have put into us from childhood on, as we come more and more to have a sense of "whatever I am, I am beginning to have my own ideas," you do develop some sense, and live with it more or less all the time, 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 90 per cent of our

lives. If I'm doing a crossword puzzle, there's no high motive necessarily involved. Instead, the activity might be more or less modestly on the side of evil, at least if I'm consuming time that might be spent in better ways. Yet, 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 at the time. And I don't think of myself as good or evil so much as probably leaning in the right direction or wrong direction.

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/or 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 a more hateful person."

So 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's not absurd, that we're all engaged in this huge cosmic war and that God needs us. That doesn't mean we can help God by setting up a set of principles for ourselves. We can't because the principles vary all the time. The cruellest obstacle to

fashioning one's ethic is that no principle is incorruptible. To hew to a principle is to corrupt oneself. Of course, to shift from one principle to another can be promiscuous. Life is not simple. Ethics is almost incomprehensible, but it exists. It is there. 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'm 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're extraordinary and fabulous, they can be awful. So I keep coming back to this. One reason I know this putative theology of mine will never take off, will never be a religious movement, is it's too difficult. It offers too little and demands too much.

ML: So it isn't so much that you have no ethical system. It's just an ethical system that cannot be abstracted, nor carved on tablets for people to carry around and consult whenever they have to make a decision. It's 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 almost like a creative dance—you do something now because the moment has come to move away from one element in yourself and in your partner to another. There is such a thing as a pure act of love when every moment is distinctive and lovely and fine. And 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 exist in 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 treacherous, even ugly. Let's say you have a wife who's been married to a man for forty years, fifty years, whatever—and in her mourning, what if she detects a secret spot of glee? "The selfish bastard is finally gone." So mourning can be a shocking terrible time for people because they discover sides of themselves they never knew existed. Or the reverse. Sometimes people die who you thought you didn't care that much about, and you discover you have lost something or someone valuable to you.

ML: That you didn't appreciate enough.

NM: Yes. And so there is the constant element of discovering yourself—not in the awful way people do in psychoanalysis where every little act has to be analyzed and re-analyzed 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? I'd even say to a stranger: If possible, 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 write all over again when I did give up smoking. 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 remove from oneself. That is why most people live indeed at a remove from themselves. And so often it's why they smoke.

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

NM: [laughs]

ML: In other words, yes, there are doors and you must open as 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 by a hurricane. A mighty change could rage through all the rooms to your psyche. One of the most self-protective, one of the most over-self-protective elements in human nature is protecting oneself from one's own dark corners.

So I don't think it's a real problem 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 your own asshole has to do with something I'd like to attach to this about the nature of defecation, shit, and waste. It's worth going back to. 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 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's natural. It's like hearing your own voice occasionally—and so often it's too shrill, too arrogant, too peremptory, too spoiled, or too harsh, too this or that. To the degree we can hear our own voice, we improve our relation with other people. Because if we find our own voice unpleasant, then if the other person starts shrieking at us, we don't have to think, "How unstable is the other." Not if we realize that our own voice was ugly enough to incite the response.

That's one of the elements in a decent marriage.

ML: 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.

NM: That may have been his one trouble. [Laughter]

ML: A while ago, you were hammering on revelation as something to be rejected by human experience. 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?

NM: No, no.

ML: What is their use then?

NM: 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 Ten Commandments. The point is not to build up an inner sense of self-righteousness—"I obey the Ten Commandments and therefore I am close to perfect. Therefore I am nearer to God." No, they're rough, general guides. "Do not kill." Well, yes, do not kill. Does that mean you have to piss on your hand 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 90-95% of the cases. But you have some—"do not commit adultery." Well, there it gets more complex. Because when people are engaged in miserable marriages, miserable unions, their lives are poisoned; their children's lives are poisoned. And at a given moment there's an impulse to escape, to commit adultery to avoid doing worse things.

Where the Ten Commandments fall down is that there are times you have to do something worse than what you're supposed to do. Because if you don't do that something worse, you're going to get into something even more destructive, more evil, more unhappy, more toxic to others.

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 stop looking upon them slavishly. Once one turns slavish in any part of one's mind, one is then open to the counterpart of slavishness, 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.

NM: I've only read Emerson but in passing, and that for a very 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 an Emerson didact, writing wonderful pieces about Emerson." My arrogance, my vanity, if you will, is that I am my own mental springboard. I've had that rare experience, probably analogous to Emerson's, of being successful enough at an early age so I didn't have 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 that 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've paid for that. No need to get into it, but vanity is corrosive.

We'll wander back into ethics from time to time. There are 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 the Greeks had 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 before you. What's the mark of moderation in a womanizer, a groper? Well, he doesn't have to feel every woman's ass he's tempted to latch his hand onto. He looks to be discriminating. The road back to balance is discrimination.

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

NM: You mean: do the right thing in the circumstances. It's Black. First, what does "do the right thing" mean? Blacks are talking about situations whites have rarely considered in their full complexity. You're a drug dealer and you're cutting your stuff and there's a guy who, on the one hand is a fool—you can take him completely and give him plain talcum powder. On the other hand, you can see he really needs it, needs a drug at that moment. So "do the right thing"—don't cut his stuff to a ridiculous level.

What I'm getting at is at every level of human existence, no matter how evil certain activities may seem to others on the outside, there is a caution present along with the impulse—except for those rare occasions when the impulse takes over entirely, and that does happen. But short of such moments, I would say that even very unpleasant, especially ugly, nasty, horrible 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 a sense of probably—and we don't always have it either—a sense of "this is better to do than that." This could even come down to calculation: you're bilking someone in a deal. But if you're going to bilk him, better to do it this way, not that way. Because if you do it one way, you'll create a desire for revenge in him, whereas that way, his feelings will be hurt but not as badly, it won't be as ugly. So what's your ethos at that moment? It's to reduce ugliness in the world system.

The point is until we look at matters that way, with a certain fresh eye, we're not qualified to speak about ethics. We are merely judgmental. Because we're trying to legislate ethics. And that's hopeless.

ML: 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."

NM: 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. . ."

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

ML: So you would not see. . .

NM: I am more concerned that we can destroy ourselves.

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

NM: It's beyond me. I wouldn't venture to say. Some of it would be obvious: more, and then more and more self-awareness. More and more freedom from fundamentalism.

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 can be greater than ours. That God's woes can be more profound than our own. That God's sense of failure could absolutely mock our own sense of failure, it's so much larger. God, I believe, has an incredible, extraordinary, beautiful vision, and is, at present, so far from fulfilling it, so mired down in corporate promotions all over the globe, superhighways, plastic, nuclear warfare, ridiculous, arrogant wars, destruction en masse of people, terrorism, exfoliation of pollution all over God's environment, that God's sorrow is immeasurably greater than ours.

So I'm saying before we can approach any thoughts of apocalypse, we have to become human enough, brave enough, to recognize we cannot rely on God. If we rely too much on God, we're probably close to killing Him. It's like being 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 the prayers. Or the abject prayer—"God have pity on me, I'm just a poor worm." Well, indeed, you may be, you're looking for succor when you don't deserve it.

We can all become a little more heroic if we recognize that God needs us at least as much as we need God. And therefore, we have to live on our own. In that way, I have a certain respect for atheists. I have huge disagreements with them—one is their absolute refusal to look at karma even for a moment. Or any kind of hereafter. Their determined intensity that there's nothing after life. You're gone, you're gone, it's the end. That creates

its own sort of trouble all over the world, including the liberal notions we have to take care of people we know nothing about and enter strange countries and show them democracy, etc., etc. But one thing I respect about atheists is they can stand on their own feet; they don't demand the presence of God in their lives. What I would be looking for ideally are people infused with a religious sense, a sense of the cosmic powers in the world, but who are yet ready to stand on their own.

ML: Could it be true that many people, as it was true for you, go from believing in an all-powerful God to atheism—that atheism is a kind of way-station to get to the kind of belief in this shared destiny of human beings and God, the triangle.

NM: The shared destiny. . . yes. I could say that has been my route, so I won't disagree with you. I think atheism is important in the scheme of things because it clears the ground of a great deal and it certainly liberates one from fundamentalism—that alone is a huge deliverance.

ML: The motivation of a lot of atheism is the inanities of organized religion.

NM: Exactly. But I would say that beyond the inanities are realities, spiritual and cosmic and divine realities. We make a great mistake if we assume those realities are not present and do not exist.

ML: Another question I want to ask you: You always talk about how an extraordinary person will end up 70% good and 30% evil and there aren't many like that. An 80/20 is really unusual.

And I thought, I've known a lot of people in my life and if I had to assign numbers after spending time with them and thinking about them, it would be more like 95/5.

NM: Really? Give me an abstract—no names. What kind of people?

ML: Oh, they don't come from any particular place. Some are family members, some are friends, some are people who seem to have heroic abilities to worry about and care about other people. Then I thought about you and the only two people I can remember when you even intimated had these saintly qualities were Mother Teresa and Malcolm Muggeridge.

NM: But I wouldn't give them a 95/5 at all. I know very little about Mother Teresa. Lately I've been hearing things about her that are not so attractive. I don't want to get into it because I'm absolutely unqualified to judge her. Malcolm Muggeridge had a saintly quality. When you were around him, you felt, "this is a very good man." But, nonetheless, Malcolm Muggeridge had his prejudices, his limitations, he could be nasty—he had been a newspaper journalist for years and we all know—what's the definition of a journalist? They thrive on nasties—that's why they become journalists.

ML: So no 95/5's for you?

NM: Oh, no. No. You can see people who seem to be good all the time, and doing things for other people all the time—

ML: That's what I meant—

NM: But there could be an inner cost to suppressing all that's bad in themselves and that affects the cosmos too.

ML: Maybe they've leached the bad out?

NM: This is empty speculation on both our sides because unless we talk of well-known figures, nobody knows what we're getting at.

ML: Let's look at the other side then, evil figures. Do you find evil figures who are 95/5?

NM: Maybe Hitler and Stalin—

ML: Hitler and Stalin—

NM: Maybe Stalin was 85/15.

ML: But you find it easier to see the high proportion on the evil side than on the good.

That's what I'm getting at.

NM: Well, you see someone like Roosevelt who finally, I think, was a good man, but I would tops, call it 65/35. More likely 57/43.

ML: So you seem to move back to that 50/50 all the time.

NM: No. It's just hard, very hard, to get beyond 55/45. Very hard. Maybe I was thinking about myself, I don't know. How would I characterize myself? On a good day, 57/43.

ML: OK. I won't pursue that any more.

Your idea of the artist, I surmise from everything we've said, and thinking as I have for many years about your own career as an artist, is that he or she at their best can clarify, they're agents of clarification. They clarify good and evil, or try to, they propel humanity toward the good, or at least they try. Is that the high function of the artist?

NM: We can't get into that. Offering magazine layouts, formulae, descriptions of the artist. No. Clarification is certainly a powerful element in an exciting artist. But to say that's all of it? No. Look at Tolstoy who certainly is more concerned than any artist we can think of in any venue—art, music, the novel, poetry, whatever—at making people better, and yet we know what a petty tyrant he was. So with all his strengths and genius and greatness, he also had his share of the ugly.

ML: But he never stopped struggling.

NM: Never stopped struggling, no. But, propel humanity toward the good—a lot of artists decide that propelling people to the good is not the function of art. There are too many ways it can become propaganda.

ML: What about Graham Greene?

NM: Well, I've certainly enjoyed Graham Greene's novels. I do think, however—and this is a cruel word to use—he's essentially anemic at propelling people toward anything. That's not his forte. His talent was to show how complex it all is, how difficult to have a sense of doing the right thing. I respect him for that; he's marvelous. But I would not call him a propellant in human culture.

I'd say, to look at my own case a moment, I'm not trying to push people toward the good because I have a tremendous distrust of what people think may be the good at a given moment. All too often, 90% 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's a fashion; it has no real basis in political reality. It can be done, you can always inject democracy into a country if you ignore the cost. It's just that you have to devote too much to doing it when it is not necessarily wanted or reasonably feasible. It's a way of giving new mind-work to a lot of over-satisfied wonks.

That was a parenthesis. The point I want to make in terms of my own stuff—what do I want from people who read me? That I sharpen their wits. More than that, I wouldn't pretend to accomplish. Because I think that's enough. My idea of a dull day is when I'm dull-witted.

ML: I want to come back one more time to love and courage. And 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 such a study in renunciation itself.

I always distrust authors, especially very good authors, when they lay out a program for their characters. Most always they're covertly supporting their own work. James is a study in renunciation. Cut off his genitals indeed—he renounced them. He didn't have a 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'd been greater as a writer, Americans would be that much better off. James is not much of a guide to the modern world any more. A marvelous guide when you're younger to understanding some of the crazy things—not crazy things—the subtly disproportionate things that go on in society, particularly high society. He's a great guide to a very limited mountain pass that most people will not approach. But renunciation is what 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 said, "You can have a life OR you can have the art and I'm going to have the art."

NM: Look, I agree, and it surprises me to a degree, particularly now that I'm old. I've been on record as saying 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 programmatic renunciation.

ML: He should have broken off the reservation once in a while? Is that what you're saying? Gone off on a hoot?

NM: Yes. Especially when you're young. Once you've had a wild time or two, you often get enough to support your imagination for a long time. The queen bee flies high in order to have that one moment of intercourse with the most loving and courageous drone there is, the one who was able to fly high enough to match her—after that, she does nothing but work all her life. But she did have that breakout, and now she can create worker bees and drones and future queens. In the harshest sense, you can say the trouble with Henry James is he never fucked another human.

ML: So he raised renunciation to too high a power and cut himself off from all the Blakeian world.

NM Yes. By the way, I will cut this off when I think I'm beginning to lose it, which I'm close to now.

ML: Yes. I am too. 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 at all. I would say I don't know. It's perfectly possible to me that Jesus is the son of God. As I said before, it's a beautiful creative act. 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 stonework put up to surround the miracle for it keeps you from coming near enough to the feeling.

ML: So the incarnation—the Word made flesh is something—

NM: No, 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.

NM: I do—and say it again, the word is the flesh?

ML: The word was made flesh. The incarnation.

NM: The flesh was transmogrified into the word. Most of us by now are transmogrified creatures. We live with the word, not the flesh.

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

NM: The writing is better, yes. Which is why people love John and follow John so much, and why he's, of the four, the most important. But he is tethered so to the word, and the human residue that comes down to us is Bible-thumpers on TV