

Metaphysical Interview 6

MICHAEL LENNON: March 20th, 2005, interview 6.

I know you've been thinking a lot about Intelligent Design and I have too. I'd like you to begin by just giving general thoughts on this idea. It seems to be gaining credibility outside religious circles and you're an unlikely person to find any credence in Intelligent Design because. . .

NORMAN MAILER: Why?

ML: Well, because it's a pet theory of the fundamentalists.

NM: I don't care. You have to understand—I've always kept open to myself—as an amateur philosopher, I've always kept open to myself the right to find remarks interesting no matter what quarter they come from. I cannot over-stress how important that is because the moment you get frozen into a stance, it tends to determine the way you think, which I want to avoid. I start as a novelist. A novelist cannot afford to get ideologically bound up in any particular stance. If they do—and novelists do it all the time, one way and another, but it's something we fight.

The most perfect example—there are two wonderful examples in America: Henry James and Hemingway, and both of them were fabulous stylists, but they paid for that huge achievement of their separate styles by being only able to write about certain kinds of things. And because, for whatever reason, I can relate to all of this, we've all done these sorts of things—it's always "do the opposite, go off in a different direction every time." Picasso, as I've said many times, had a huge influence on me because for him, style was not a part of one's person, not necessarily, so much as a tool with which you could attack reality. And therefore, if you attack reality from one direction, then attack it from another.

But as far as this idea of Intelligent Design, let me say I come to it somewhat superficially, except the entire notion of this work, of doing these interviews, is exactly that I won't be embarrassed by my lack of knowledge, because what impresses me about theologians because they are all—no matter what high level they are at—they are trapped, absolutely trapped, by their ideas, most of them received ideas, which they have to live with. And what you see are these veritable mental gymnastics. The tsunami was a wonderful example of that. What can I say? I wish I knew more ballet terms, but—unbelievable, they spoke of the "great mystery." In fact, if it weren't such a serious business, it was as if they delighted in the fact they

could hide behind the "mystery" one more time—for the twenty-eighth thousandth time.

My feeling has been from the word "go," that God created us in His image or Her image—which seems as reasonable to me as no, God was working toward an image, working, and working, laboring, to find a better creation than His last one. Remember my remark that I think the dinosaurs, at one point, were a huge part of God's beliefs—He finally found this immense animal that could run the world, then discovered He had misdesigned it and had to go back to the drawing board, so to speak. Part of the humor for me in religion is that God, like us, makes mistakes. The point I'm getting at is I had no idea that Intelligent Design came from the fundamentalists. I happened to read one story in the papers and nothing beyond that.

ML: Well, I don't want to say they invented the idea, because it's been around back to the 18th century when the world was conceived almost as a clock, it was so perfectly designed. So it's really something that grows out of the Enlightenment, as far as that goes, and you can probably trace it back to the Greeks—but then, you can probably trace almost anything back to the Greeks. However—

NM: Maybe I have a misunderstanding of what is meant by Intelligent Design on the basis of reading this one article in the Times, which is that some believe in evolution these days, and now there's a new concept, Intelligent Design, which is that some of this was intended. In other words, -this is how I read it, and maybe this is my bent, and I misread it, but I don't think so—the notion is there is some force in existence that is looking to design creation and I thought this is perfect for what I am talking about because I think, yes, God is always looking to design creation, to make it better and better, but God has these errors. God is an artist, and because God is an artist, He doesn't always succeed, He sometimes fails as well.

ML: You understood the article right, but you can see how it would lend support to those people who are opposed to evolution because this shows the hand of the Creator, and it's all there.

NM: It isn't all there—I don't go near that at all. The Creator was there—only people who have no understanding of an artist can speak that way. In other words, the Creator saw it all at once, and did it perfectly and spat it out

and, lo and behold, it's been perfect ever since, and He never messed up this extraordinary design? Not so.

ML: Let me say what I understand to be the fundamentalist position on Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design would say: we don't know exactly what processes, natural selection, mutation, evolution, the Intelligence used to create the world, we're not saying that, but we are saying that what does exist out there in nature bespeaks of an Intelligence behind it at some level—maybe many removes back, maybe many processes. As opposed to some fundamentalists saying God created the world in one instant six thousand years ago. You wouldn't go along with that at all.

NM: Of course not.

ML: But what they've done with the evolutionists, is Intelligent Design people say that even evolution and mutation over eons cannot explain the appearance of design we see in natural life. Intelligence had to be involved. Darwin said: I don't know, here's the process; I don't know if there was anything behind the process.

NM: I'm no more an expert on evolution than I am on Intelligent Design. I will say this: it certainly makes great sense to me that Intelligent Design is absolutely one of the elements in our evolution, and what I find comfortable, even agreeable about it as a notion, is precisely that if you have a God who can begin to create a universe as manifold as this—how indeed could it be done without having Intelligent Design, without having notions that this is where to go here, this is how to do that, this is how to develop this species, here's what's wrong with this species, there I didn't conceive of enough. Now, the other element I get into over and over and over is God is not all-powerful. These creations go out into a receptive world that doesn't receive them necessarily with open arms. And they change and they're shifted and as soon as God as the artist has to say to Himself or Herself, "I didn't anticipate this or that"—

ML: Tectonic plates. . .

NM: Exactly, over and over. The tectonic plates are an example of God's incapacity to design the world well enough so there wouldn't be these shifting tectonic plates and hideous earthquakes.

ML: Or, to engage the argument, the tectonic plates are just another example of the randomness and the chaos of the universe.

NM: But, you see, the artist works to extract some order from chaos. I would not say chaos is a lack of order. Chaoses are sets of orders that are too complex and too disparate to be ordered within the consciousness of the artist, of the one who would order it. So that each element in chaos can have its own set of bylaws, if you will, until that chaos comes into conflict with another set of bylaws and they're incompatible and tear each apart. You see, I would use Intelligent and Malign Design, all through the universe. By Malign Design, I mean there are people—no, forces, that would be congenial to God's concepts of creativity, and forces opposed to it. And how do I arrive at this? Through the very simple notion that everywhere in existence you find nothing have a free ride. If something comes along that seems wonderful in the beginning, then the opposition begins, the enjambments begin. Sooner or later forward motion is paralyzed or comes to a stop. So when I see this ongoing, continuing intensity of design and evolution—and the evolution, the yin and yang—I hate yin and yang, the warp and the woof—

ML: So you would call it, the Mailer Theory of Intelligent Design. . .

NM: No, no, no—

ML: All right, you would espouse a theory of Intelligent Design that has imperfect design.

NM: No, the design can be perfect until it runs into chaotic elements that could not be comprehended in advance.

ML: That's imperfection.

NM: No. Perfection is too broad a word here. In other words, sometimes you see creatures in the universe who are so exquisitely designed that the moment you mention Intelligent Design, you say, of course! Evolution, trial and error, could not have produced some of the beautiful forms we see in the animal world. Even if we find most insect forms repellant, nonetheless, when we look at them under the microscope, the extraordinary work that went into them, it's very hard to keep believing that evolution said, "yes, the six feelers on this particular leg will have these wonderful curves like

scimitars," and this came about because it was the best way to do it. I would rather this was designed and then—that to me comes closer to what the nature of reality must be.

ML: Let me give you one criticism of Intelligent Design to see if—one criticism is this: you know the old cliché that if you put a million monkeys in a room with a million typewriters—or a billion, whatever it is—eventually one of them will produce War and Peace or Hamlet. Well, if you look at the universe—

NM: But I know that's not true. That's the sort of thing you go to a computer for. I forget the incredible number but it's too vast to be interesting.

ML: OK, it's too vast to be interesting. But, remember, the universe is vast.

NM: But—

ML: Let me give you the criticism—

NM: I'm listening.

ML: In the vastness of the universe, we know there are billions and billions of stars and solar systems and galaxies. So far, to our limited knowledge, of the ones we've looked at, not one of them come close to having the appurtenances of design for a universe, that is the ultraviolet light being shielded by an atmosphere. We can see the failure of that on Mars and Venus. And the water and the rain and the animals and all the things that come to—the world itself has made people say this amazing, organic system that all works together over a period of time, there's nothing like that anywhere we can see in the universe, despite repeated probings to find it. There's been no messages back, nothing like it. Couldn't it be we're just a fluke of the universe? Now, this is a criticism against intelligent design—in a universe so vast with so many possibilities, you've got to have one planet—

NM: But I'd call that an argument FOR Intelligent Design. Precisely you have nothing working remotely anything like the way it does on earth, with all that fineness of detail, and the notion that all this interlocking is merely expressing functions within functions within functions and you find that

nowhere else in the universe—that is precisely a powerful argument for Intelligent Design.

ML: OK, but then what's the function of all the other stars and galaxies?

NM: Well, once you get beyond the solar system, I feel that—and here is a remark I enjoy—I feel I know no more than the theologians. To wit—and the reason I have this vanity I know more than the theologians is as a novelist I've been free to think about life all my life, given the circumstances of my life. I was a novelist at the age of 25 and have been one ever since. I've spent my life thinking about what is the nature of human nature. Theologians don't have that liberty. They have to say, "How do I explain the miracles and the illogic of the New Testament, the Old Testament," or—I won't get into Islam but obviously, there are problems of that sort over there too—I have not had to carry that burden.

ML: But you must be aware—I know you're aware because I know you're an avid reader—you know there are other solar systems, other galaxies—

NM: I've only dabbled in that. We don't begin to know about other solar systems. All we do know, all we can really say with some authority is that in our solar system, the earth seems to be the only planet that made it. All right. So it may be that other gods—and there may be more powerful gods—they too have had their failures. So we start with the Big Bang: the Big Bang is a creative process that goes on through eons of time that destroy our very concept of the possibility of understanding time. But in any event, all we can state with any certainty, is that the earth succeeded in doing something none of the other planets were able to do. And so far as we can see, given the limited powers of astronomy today, there seem to be no near galaxies or other systems comparable. But there may be. There very well may be. There is no real knowledge whether there are or not since there are so many stars. And so many possibilities. So all we can begin to say is that it seems reasonable to posit a god for our universe.

ML: For our solar system.

NM: For our solar system. It may be that this God failed with other planets. Prior to the earth. I don't even begin to get near that because it's all too easy and too fanciful. But what I say is—I don't want to lose this now—I would

say it is far more difficult to conceive of our existence if there is no God. Because then we are back to the trillions of monkeys writing Hamlet and that is hard to believe. It is much easier for me to believe Hamlet is a part of intelligent design. And if it's not a part of Intelligent Design, then if 15 nano-trillion monkeys could also produce Hamlet, what a waste. Look at the man-hours, look at—there has to be the assumption, along with everything else—this is very important—that existence is moving toward something. That existence itself in the deepest, most cosmic sense, is in peril and is moving forward toward something. It's as if we had a rendezvous with disaster if we don't reach a certain period at a certain time, and this sense of disaster that sits over the earth and the solar system may fall upon the universe as well. There are certain things that have to be achieved in order to guarantee the continuation of existence.

This is the very limited, reasonable paranoia. By reasonable paranoia, I mean it comes out without getting nervous about it, without having chills, yet when I start to contemplate these matters, it seems to me that is a reasonable assumption. So obviously, that feeling, Intelligent Design is a crucial part of it. You don't want to just stumble forward with all one's errors. If—when you think of the artists, the great novelists, even those who wrote thumbing their noses, so to speak, at God, people like Dreiser and

Zola, had a great deal of Intelligent Design in their work. Then, of course, you get the artisans, the true artisans like James and Hemingway, and if anything, they were given over to design. It's as if their works live by themselves. They can't come in contact with the raw breath of existence, just the way certain of God's designs, if you will, because they were over-designed. I wish I knew more of botany and zoology because I'm sure there are other examples there.

ML: You've gone off in two very interesting directions but I want to talk about—you mention Hemingway and James and over-design—one of my questions relates to that and it's this: Is there any relation between your idea of a universe at war and Intelligent Design, and your disdain for plot for your novels? Does the latter reflect the former?

NM: That's a big question. Before I get into it, let me add one great writer who is greater than the first two and that's Joyce. Joyce is doing something else entirely. Joyce is playing at the very edges of chaos. He's saying, "look how much you can do with what would be chaos in anyone else's hands." Which is why it is very hard to get near him because we have an instinctive sense we want to avoid chaos, and it's very hard to understand him. But he

undertook to organize whole areas of chaos, it's just another way to do it.

But when you start talking about Intelligent Design, then Joyce is there as an incredible figure as an artist.

Now, to go back to your question if you'd rephrase it for me. . .

ML: Yes. So many times you have written in your review of Tom Wolfe's books, in many essays, many interviews, that, look, I don't worry about plot.

Plot is just something that is much less important to me than character.

Now, I don't mean plot-as-story—you always have a storyline, but your plots are not Jamesian plots—

NM: They're not clockwork.

ML: They're not pieces of clockwork. I've wondered if for you to have a plot that was very neat and tight and ordered would run counter to your ideas of metaphysics.

NM: When I speak of Intelligent Design, plot is Intelligent Design. It's very well put that you can make that analogy. Plot is interesting to me—and I thought about it a lot in the years I wrote about Harlot's Ghost because

there's the CIA. And I thought there's a perfect example of plot—Intelligent Design coming into contact with the world, coming into contact and conflict with the world. And you see, the reason I don't like plots is they don't allow the figures in the book, the characters in the book, to come into the limits of the plot to the point where life rejects the plot because it's too neat and throws them into another set of conditions that are not quite definable. To me, the uses of plot are in those novels—maybe we'll think of a few while we're talking—where one begins with the plot and then the plot gets shattered.

Now Borges spent his life writing short stories, 5 and 6 page short stories that start with incredible plots and then the plots get shattered. Incredible stories. He, like Joyce, was fascinated with making attacks on the nature of chaos. And to define and delineate chaos. Now Borges showed for all time—talk about a novelist's novelist—he is the novelist's novelist's novelist—he said: "Look what you're all doing. You're taking yourselves too seriously. You're missing the fact that once a plot is shattered, life goes on. The demand continues. There's another species of life and you have to deal with it."

Now, take it back to Intelligent Design. God looks for Intelligent Design. That Intelligent Design gets worked upon by existence. Orville

Wright designed an airplane. And after he designed it, he got it up in the air and the first time—what? It flew a few hundred feet. That was the beginning of Intelligent Design going back to the drawing board, going back, going back, to refine the first knowledge that was received. My argument is Intelligent Design cannot exist without experience. So long as it remains Intelligent Design, it remains analogous to any number of very talented young novelists who never publish because they never get their book to the point where they want it. They will not dare put their book out on the waters. And so implicit in my notion of Intelligent Design is experience. You launch the Intelligent Design and see what happens to it and that's how you learn, how you get to the next Intelligent Design. It's inconceivable to me God would not work that way.

ML: What about a novel like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*?

NM: I don't remember it well enough—and maybe you can refine it for me—I don't think he was concerned that much with plot per se. Well, he has a family, and all sorts of things happen to this family, and there's a wonderful sense of look at the chaos of life, and look at how people react to

it, and how quickly they react, and I just don't think this novel applies to the problem of plot.

Take Joyce. One of my favorite metaphors for Joyce—this is from the book about Henry Miller. I give the example: three people come into a room, a hostess's living room, Henry James, Hemingway, and Henry Miller. And the way it went, each gives a tip of the hat and lo and behold, there's a cow turd on their head. James would be so totally shattered he would have had a breakdown, he might have died from an experience that awful. Hemingway would have gone into a profound depression—he would have seen it as the nature of life, that unexpected disasters, truly, truly shattered your mood that life was something you could enjoy. And Miller would have said, "Good Lord, how did that shit get on my head? And the hostess, I can't tell if it's her nostrils that are quivering or her twat! She is obviously so excited and perturbed—what a wonderful moment!" Miller is an example of someone who couldn't stay with a plot for five minutes because he wanted plot to smash into the world and reveal something new about himself and the world. So he's one extreme, Henry James is the other. And between them lies Intelligent Design.

ML: But what would Joyce have done?

NM: Joyce is so much of a genius I don't want to hang onto his coattails because I'll fall off. I don't know what he would have done.

ML: I think he would have appreciated it.

NM: He would have looked for the 22 words that were closest to shit, and those that were deviants in their meaning but nonetheless had to be taken into account, and what would be the wonderful omnibus word he would come up with? On the other hand, he would have been removed from the situation.

ML: He was the first. . .

NM: It was not life he was interested in so much as language.

ML: The first person to wipe his ass in a novel—a description of wiping your ass in a novel—he rips a page out of a book and wipes his ass.

NM: It kept the book from being published.

ML: Yes, people were offended by it. I can't help from quoting the line of Edgar Allen Poe who said, "The universe is a plot of God."

NM: Well, that's Poe. "The universe is a plot of God"—what does it mean? Look into it—it doesn't mean anything.

ML: Poe had a sense that the universe would unfold itself—the universe would expand and expand, and then contract and contract, and then into one ball, and then it would be repeated.

NM: It's a species of fundamentalism to have ideas like that. The idea that the universe is part of a machine whose movements can be predicted is what I'm totally against. It's why I'm so opposed to organized religion. I was listening to television the other night and one of those guys—and God, they are imitable—you know, Nietzsche abhors every priest and he meant not just every Catholic priest but every reverend—he calls them all liars. He says the sine qua non for becoming a theologian is to be a liar. All right, so you've this minister talking in that big, Southern voice that any impassioned fool can imitate, saying, "It's not enough to go to your death believing in the

Lord Jesus, you have to have all the people you brought with you because you convinced them that they, too, must believe in Jesus, and then you'll be measured how many you bring to Jesus." And I listened and I thought, "where the fuck does he get all this crap? Arrogance—to speak with any kind of certitude?" I never cease apologizing for speaking with any certitude in this book. It's outrageous.

ML: Let me go back to Sartre. You recently criticized Sartre's existentialism for being "floorless." Without floor.

NM: Without a foundation.

ML: Because, as you put it, "It is, after all, near to impossible for philosopher to explore into why we are here without entertaining some notion of what prior force might have been." Therefore, if we grant your limited God is that prior force—and I'm happy to grant that—then I'm compelled to ask what force preceded your God? I assume you would choose infinite regress rather than a Prime Mover?

NM: Again, I refuse to be trapped in those kinds of questions. I mean, that's the atheist's last line of defense. There's a story you're probably familiar with, of Bertrand Russell and the lady—Russell is talking about how the origin of the universe is not knowable. And a lady, a distinguished old lady says, "On the contrary, Professor Russell. I know the basis of the universe." He says, "Well, what is it, Madam?" She replies, "The universe is resting upon a turtle." And he says, "Well, thank you, Madam." "A giant turtle," she adds. "Well, Madam, that's very helpful, but what is the turtle resting upon?" And she says, "It's turtles all the way down!"

ML: I do remember that.

NM: I'm not going to get trapped in that. The arguments of the atheists—they're saying because you can't explain what came behind the God you're talking about, you have no right to talk about God.

ML: But you beat Sartre over the head because he won't allow for a force behind humanity. Why can't we then try to find out—I'm not trying to refute you, but—

NM: OK, let me put it this way: we first have to become close enough to God and helpful enough to God—large questions we haven't even entered, the relationship of humankind to God is something we haven't even touched on—and until we're a great help to God, why should God trust us? You remember, at the end of *Harlot's Ghost*, I have Huge Montague goes off on this wonderful—to me, wonderful—speech on how God, having decided—he gives his defense of Creationists—that God having decided man was wholly untrustworthy, therefore created the illusion of evolution, and He put fossil remains in different places, created the entire notion that the universe was created in six days.

ML: I remember it well—a beautiful piece of writing.

NM: Maybe we could insert it—I didn't say it very well in here. Excuse me—the universe really was created entire, immediately, *ex nihilo*, by God, but he then put evidence all over the place that evolution had done it so man would not get near God's roots. So, implied in all that is that when we get close enough to God to feel we are in some kind of alliance with God—which I think has always been implicit in the relationship but may not be actual, because as you know from my novel, I believe in the devil to an

extraordinary degree—so the answer is we don't begin to know who the God is behind God till we get nearer to God.

ML: But you see that as a possibility.

NM: Yes. Ultimately. Ultimately. If things go far better than I expect they will.

ML: Here's something. I don't know if you're familiar with the philosopher David Hume—

NM: Vaguely. I had him in college.

ML: Well, he actually got into the Intelligent Design argument way back when because one of the proofs of St. Thomas Aquinas for the existence of God is the argument from design. It goes back that far, a thousand years. A different way of putting it, Aquinas has many proofs of God's existence but the fifth one was the design is so perfect in the universe—he didn't even see beyond the solar system—

NM: But there, you run smack into the ugly helmet of Catholicism, that ugly helmet with all those projections that smash your face when you try to embrace it—you know, the insistence of Catholicism on perfection and God's perfection, is one of the things—I feel as if I run into a magnetic field that just repels me when I come near that. Because precisely what characterizes Intelligent Design is that it's partial. And that's so important to grasp the notion that these are partial attempts. I'm so glad we have the novel to fall back upon; it's the metaphor. When you write a novel, a novel is an exercise, an attempt to come up with a piece of intelligent design and it's never perfect, never. Some parts of the Intelligent Design are better than others and the way you find out is by publishing. And then the returns come back and very often the returns have no relation to what you had written. Occasionally they do. And slowly over the years you learn more and more and more, and by the end of your life as a novelist you are wiser than when you started. And the heart of one of my notions in all this is that God is always looking to become wiser. That notion we mentioned way back is God the Father does not always necessarily understand the children all that well. And that is also in the nature of existence, that what you create, you do not necessarily understand completely.

ML: Now, listen to this collision between Aquinas and David Hume:

Hume criticized the argument from design. In particular, he emphasized there is no legitimate way—now this is a paragraph, so bear with me—there is no legitimate way, Hume said, we can infer the properties of God from the qualities of the world, his creation. For instance, Hume questioned, how can we be sure the world was not created by a team? Or this is but one of many attempts at creation, the first few having been botched? Or, on the other hand, that our world is not puerile first attempt of an infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance.

NM I want to see where we are—I can't read these numbers—

ML: We're fine.

NM: It's excellent. If I'd read it, I would have quoted it. These are various possibilities; they're all possible logically. It's perfectly possible God has deserted the universe. I think it's a little weak to say it was a lame performance and He moved on. That doesn't fulfill my notion of the passion implicit in the artistry of God. I can't conceive of a great artist ever junking a work and moving on because it's lame, if that has been the major

opus. I do lean to the notion that our world was God's major opus, certainly for this solar system. But Hume put it very well. The argument of a perfect universe is almost intolerable. All it does is scramble people's brains and say to the deans of the church that they believe for a certainty the priests are over them. Which is not fair. And then the priests suffer prodigiously. I really think an absolutely great novel could be written about the Catholic Church and the people who work in it—many times I wish I were a Catholic as a novelist, as a greedy novelist. Man, what material is there, what material! But the training is such that it's almost impossible for someone who's a priest to become a novelist—a great novelist.

ML: It's a fabulously successful institution—and probably because of that.

NM: Fabulously successful, yes, but you could also say the Jewish religion has been fabulously successful in that the Jews didn't perish—but what a price they paid. And I'd say what a price Catholics have paid. To have created a Church that brought so much architectural beauty to the world, so much musical beauty, so much ritual beauty—and then be locked into a set of notions they can't let go of that explain nothing.

You know, organized religion when it's beautiful moves me to the extent that I feel "How tragic. How painful." All this thought, all this devotion, all this loyalty, going into a sump, an intellectual sump because it explains nothing. All they believe is that God will be there to hear our prayers, welcome us when we die—as if that's all God has to do, as if God is a couch potato—sighs when He has to get up to answer the doorbell to welcome a new devotee.

ML: So the idea the universe might have been created by a team--?

NM: Not impossible. Not impossible. It explains one of my basic notions in that the team soon fell out of sorts with one another and you ended up with God and the Devil—one leader was called God and one was called the Devil. I think it could easily explain the book I'm working on now—it was created by a team. It could have been started as, as—

ML: A joint endeavor—

NM: A joint endeavor means two totally separate parties come together? Like those South Seas Companies in the 1700s, 1800s. Absolutely. And then they fought and have been fighting ever since.

ML: Well, that's all but we can handle Judith's questions

NM: —although we don't have to do it all today. Up to now I've felt fine—

ML: They go in all different directions—

NM: Let's see what happens—I may not be able to answer her questions.

ML: Here's one: "If, as you say, the Creator is an artist, and not all creative works are equally successful, wouldn't this lead quite easily to racism—i.e., the "inferior race"—however one's defining it, whether the non-Aryans scapegoated by the Nazis, or the "ice people" of the Afro-centric extremists, wouldn't that "inferior" group simply be one of God's early, inferior drafts?"

NM: Well, I reject the language of the question. But I think that all of the dangers, one of the absolute disasters that Hitler and Nazism brought to

human understanding was an abuse of the concept of race. Because it offers us great clues. It is perfectly possible—and here again, one can only speculate—but it is perfectly possible that races, in the beginning, were intelligent design for different situations. In other words, for people in the tropics, God was saying, "well, how can I design the heating system of their bodies so they can bear the heat?" Ditto for the north. We're discovering that living in these separate climates produces different relaxations and strictures of the throat, and so there are changes in language. Mind you, God is discovering as the artist, discovering within the material itself, where the continuation is. Certain sculptors talk about how they know nothing of what they're essentially going to do until they see the work in the marble—it's as if the marble reveals to them what they must do with the next stroke. Well, maybe the same thing is true with fashioning human designs, animal designs, what have you, and as you work with these designs and attempt to work with them and refine them, the environment plays a great role.

Going back to Hume for a moment, it could be that God came in after a semi-inchoate universe was shaping, and had to deal with the given. That is absolutely within the realm of possibility. There I have to say Hume points the way.

ML: Good, very good. Next one: Your conception of God as artist assumes that God is both vastly-but not all-good, and vastly—but not all-powerful. But why couldn't God be not very compassionate at all and instead immensely curious? In other words, He is fascinated by, but not especially compassionate toward creation, much like a child who winds up toys and watches them slam into each other and chortles at the smashup. You say, "In other words, why are there volcanoes? Because God was not a perfect engineer" Or because like a two-year-old, God found the noise and fury fascinating and amusing. Maybe even the shrieks of the dying fascinating and amusing. You keep assuming God is a nice person, so to speak, but that seems a bit arbitrary. Your reaction?

NM: It is arbitrary, and it could be my conditioning. I grew up in a household that was as religious as the next—it wasn't a dogma-driven household, but I remember my mother on Friday night praying before a lit candle, praying to Shekhina, who is, of course, the wife of God, and there were tears in my mother's eyes and a feeling of great tenderness and compassion was coming off her. And from that, I think I always assumed and took it for granted that God is compassionate in relation to us.

Now, those arguments raised cannot be denied. I cannot refute them. I cannot say, "No, God is not going in for capers. He's not going in for mean streaks." Of course, God could go in for that. But to me—maybe because I too am searching for an orderly existence to some degree—the notion that God and the devil are in conflict with one another makes more sense to me than that we've got this one God who has good and bad, as compassionate as Jesus and a mean little prick in the corners. That I find really goes nowhere. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist. That question is not refutable.

ML: Well, your mother's father was a rabbi.

NM: Yes. He was a kosher rabbi, he was—a back-bencher rabbi. He'd done a lot of scripture-reading into the game. What happened was he studied to be a rabbi in Lithuania but by the he came over here, the only way he could make his living was a peddler. Then he moved to small town called Long Branch, New Jersey, where he opened a butcher shop. [Side One Ends.] So when he came to Long Branch, he was a butcher, but he had the education to be a rabbi, so occasionally when the rabbi was ill—there was only one synagogue in Long Branch—so when the rabbi was ill or off

on vacation, he was the rabbi. And my mother was very proud of him. In the fundamental snobbery of the Jews, she was very proud—it was much better to be a rabbi than a butcher. I was delighted, it gave me two different strains to develop.

ML: Well, I'm thinking of your mother's devotion and the tear in her eye—obviously, she must have come from a pretty religious household.

NM: He was very religious—he started studying the Talmud when he was four years old. The best thing to be said about the Talmud is it's very hard to become a fundamentalist reading the Talmud. It's all too easy reading the Bible but very difficult reading the Talmud because the Talmud is the opposite of the Old Testament. It inquires into the nuances of things. For instance, in the Talmud, the people brought animals to be sacrificed to the temple. Very often there were small disasters—a poor man wanted to sacrifice his prize heifer because his child was ill and he wanted to pray to God so he's sacrificing his heifer into the synagogue and the animal would defecate. Well, the Talmud gets into where did it defecate—on the outside, on the patio, did it defecate on the steps, in the vestibule, in the aisle, at the altar approach, was it on the altar—could there be a sacrifice where it

defecated—all these are different proximities and therefore there are different punishments. In certain cases the animal can still be sacrificed, perhaps, partially. In other cases, the animal is lost completely—if it defecates close enough to the altar, it has to be thrown away completely. It can't even be eaten, and so forth. So in the Talmud there are all these efforts to find zones of relative compatibility between God and humans—the exact opposite of the Old Testament in that sense. The Old Testament and the New Testament are completely—I use the word rhetorical. In other words, they lay it out: they say "This is the way it is. Don't argue with it." Then, of course, they contradict themselves two pages later.

ML: Well—and there is a certain measure, which you yourself recognize, of Orphic ambiguity in the utterances of Christ.

NM: I wouldn't call it ambiguity. I would call it the wars of the committees. And, you know, it's exactly equal to what's going on between the Sunnis and the Shiites in Iraq, to wit, I'll give you this and you give me that.

ML: Did your mother talk much about her father?

NM: Only with a kind of gentle reverence. She adored him, and he was a very kind man. She told one story I loved when I was a kid. She said, "My mother worked so hard in the butcher shop, and we as children worked hard, I worked hard—we'd get angry at my father because when a poor woman would come in and he'd be weighing the meat she bought, he'd put his finger under the scale so it cost less. And we thought, That's all very well, but you're taking the money away from us."

ML: So he was a compassionate man.

NM: Most people seemed to think he was a lovely man. Who knows? I like to think so too.

ML: Here's a question on ritual: All your ideas have an underlying assumption that God has a continuing, even a profound interest in at least some individuals, and certainly in the ultimate fate of the human species and the rest of His creation. This is completely at odds with some of the earliest recorded religious expression, namely from the Sumerians, whose prayers were always begging the gods to "Remember!" Prayer and ritual were a

constant attempt to engage the attention of forgetful and indifferent gods who had created and abandoned humanity. This, by the way, wasn't a notion emerging from disasters and dislocations but could be found even as their civilization flourished. Can you comment?

NM: Well, I can attempt to comment. It's the other half of the equation. I think one of the reasons American fundamentalists who've invaded us en masse these days—you know, there's a close war going on between Texas Hold'Em Poker and fundamentalists. Night after night, the fundamentalists skunk the Texas Hold'Em Poker players, in that there'll be five fundamentalist shows on in a given hour and two poker shows—all right, I'm joking, but the obverse side of prayer is that it never gets answered. So rarely is it answered. So rarely that people cite these things at these religious meetings as miracles. [in a southern accent] "I prayed to God and I didn't know if I was answered or not, and then, to my astonishment, I fell to my knees and I began to weep, I began to weep for the sores of Christ because my prayer had been answered." Prayers are not answered. I always felt the Lord has enough to take care of without having to listen to a bunch of repetitive prayers. To use a modern assumption, it's like people who get on the internet because they want to be part of what's going on and they

discover that thousands of boring messages come to them that they have to wade through. Think of God wading through those prayers: "Oh, God, let my team win the game!" "Oh, God, let me get some money, let me sell this old heap that's no good and get something better because I need it to drive the children to school, you understand," all that, all that.

I don't think God listens to prayer. The Sumerians—I don't know anything about them. I think they were relatively sophisticated people who recognized that they prayed and they prayed and they prayed and answers didn't come very often. In fact, talk about the mega-million monkeys typing Hamlet, some of the same could be applied to prayer.

Now let me say there are some people with a child who's ill, and they pray to God with great sincerity for their child to live, and usually the child does live—I'm willing to accept the idea that that's not something to sneer at. I'm not saying it helps or it works but humanly speaking, we can certainly feel for the parent who weeps in that manner.

ML: You wrote once about the time you prayed.

NM: Yes.

ML: Yes. Bobby Kennedy.

NM: Well, there was another time I prayed—well, I don't want to get into it, I'll tell you off the record.

ML: Let's go on to another question.

NM: The reason I don't want to get into it is it's a long, comic story and has nothing to do with what we're talking about. It's not a revelation, or I'd tell you about it.

ML: When you were talking about Gandhi, you said: "But there are a few [oxymorons] that are vital and immensely valuable. One of them is "heroic passivity." That's where one's wisdom becomes the arbiter. There can be heroic passivity, or quasi- heroic passivity. The latter might be a disaster." Along that same line, what would you say about any possible value of the contemplative life? By that I mean the cloistered orders who don't run hospitals or schools, just pray for the world. This is a strong Christian tradition, ditto for the Buddhists and some Hindus, and probably the Jews have some variant of that.

NM: The Twelve Just Men. . .

ML: Do you see a value in this kind of passivity?

NM: I would answer yes. I'm not opposed to that. Yeah, we haven't talked about the relation of God to humans and humans to God.

ML: We have.

NM: Yes, but if we're going to get nearer to God to find the God behind the God, in that sense, it's perfectly conceivable to me there could be a God who really pays attention to transcendental sincerity. And I have a crude analogy to offer, which is occasionally, after having worked on a novel, you get a review that's so intelligently written and gets to close to what I was attempting to do, or shows me new ways I didn't see in the book, that illumines the book for me, I love that critic and I do feel better about the act of writing. And I think taken through many orders of magnitude, I think there are people who contemplate existence, who pray to God in their sleep and on their knees and are qualified to do so, who are not petty greed-bags.

What I hate about prayer is most of the time it's so greedy, I'm trying to get an edge—I'm a mediocrity, I'm kind of stupid, God, but maybe you'll help me because I'm praying to you.

ML: That does fit in. This is about Buddhism: what's your take on the Buddhist notion of the bodhisatva vow? Reaching nirvana is a catch-22—if you have achieved a level of deep compassion, enough to reach nirvana, you can't go happily off into it while other sentient beings are still here struggling and suffering. So, even though you personally have a free-pass out of this far from perfect world, you VOLUNTARILY reincarnate as a "bodhisatva"—a helper, a teacher, a way-shower—and KEEP reincarnating until everyone has achieved nirvana. Devout Buddhists of many persuasions—and all the monks and nuns, take the "bodhisatva vow" at an advanced stage of their training.

NM: Well, I think it's a beautiful notion and I subscribe to it—not personally. I wouldn't make it; I don't have that kind of compassion. The difficulty I've always had with Buddhism is nirvana—that the point of existence is not to rise above all petty feeling, but on the contrary, to be able to struggle with those petty feelings in such a way that we alter them into

somewhat more vigorous feelings, you're more able to contribute to the best of existence. So nirvana always struck me as a place I had no interest in. If it existed or not—I had no idea—it didn't appeal to me. I remember talking to a friend of mine who's a good Buddhist and scolding him, getting into a rage over drinks: "You bastards always talk about nothingness, getting to nothingness. I'm a writer, I live with nothingness every minute I'm working. I sit at my desk and for the first half hour there's nothing—I have to pass through it in order to get a few ideas. I said, why the hell—you're not talking about nothingness. Nothingness is an awful state! It's an empty state. Why don't you talk about what it really is, which is the ineffable? When you get into the ineffable, then you have something to talk about!"

I like to think he was struck with it, even a little.

Back to the boddhisatva: I think it's an absolutely beautiful conception. Whether true or not, I have no idea. In other words, true or not in the sense whether one has the power to say, I choose to reincarnate rather than going into Nirvana, I think the Lord might say, "Reincarnation's not your choice, it's mine." And in that sense, I'm beyond my range. I can step away from that question with the idea it is a beautiful notion.

ML: Look at the end of your last interview, you said in many ways the Creator was like a Greek god—strong yet not all powerful, flawed but noble, well, you know Greek myths are full of incidents where the gods took human form, or animal form. Apart from the well-known stories of Zeus turning up as this or that to impregnate some human woman, there are also stories of Zeus turning up as a beggar. In one story, peasants take in a wretched beggar overnight, share their far-from abundant meal with him, treat him very well, and next morning, find his bed empty and a sack of gold in his place—Zeus came calling—and rewarded them for their kindness to the poor! God showing up on earth is an idea embraced long before Christian theology, but I see nothing in your writings of God as a swan, a river, or anything as possibly Jesus.

NM: I don't see any need to answer the question. I just take it for granted. If God wants to appear as a human, why not? And indeed, He would. But I think actually what's more interesting is the belief if you're good when you don't have to be good, something wonderful happens. Which I think is also part of human nature. Humans live for revenge—but they also live for a sentiment that maybe I am capable of goodness. So the brunt of those stories, the impact they have on me, is look at the human desire involved.

One, that I can be capable of goodness and two, that there's something in the universe ~~that~~ rewards you for goodness. Prayer is the ugly stepchild of that emotion. What makes it interesting is the pot of gold—they weren't praying for the gold. That's far better than saying, "Hey, I was good—now reward me!"

ML: That's it.