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Vitality

Carnal, Seraphic Bodies

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Introduction

Autumn comes quickly to the High Sierra. At 8,500 feet above sea level, the long, warm days of summer give way to crisp mornings, long shadows, and the first flurries of snow on the ridges and peaks. There are huge swaths of isolated terrain here, even in the summer; but after Labor Day the crowds really begin to thin, and after the equinox one can find deep silence and solitude in the hushed *diminuendo* before the long silence of winter. In this transitional period one finds the Sierra at its finest, its dappled landscape a sweeping testament to Donne's contention that "in heaven it is always autumn."¹

Early one morning, in the autumn of 1995, I hiked alone into the Cathedral Range, just south of Tuolumne Meadows, an area dotted with moderate peaks. Over the course of the day I climbed and traversed over a dozen distinct summits, spires, and ridges before turning north again and hiking out to the road. With nothing other than a small daypack to hold my climbing shoes and some water, now long gone, my body glided lightly over the trail, weaving in and out of Sierra lodgepole, alongside a stream drawn down by the summer, and across granite slabs shining with glacial polish. As the trees thinned approaching the meadow I slowed down so as to prolong the moment; my body flushed with the radiance of exertion, which was mirrored by the rosy alpenglow on the granite domes and, in the distance, on the summit of Mt. Conness. Minutes later, arriving at the road in the waning light, a lone car sped past me heading east into the dusk and the long descent into Owens Valley. The noise of the engine, rising and falling with the Doppler shift, was not exactly jarring, but incongruous; it pulled me from one world into another, as if waking from a dream or reverie.

Later that evening, camped with a murmuring creek at my feet and the brilliant river of the Milky Way above my head, I thought about the

experience. I realized that while I'd been on the move for many hours, hiking and climbing thousands of feet of moderately technical ground, what stood out was not a clear, linear narrative of the events of the day. My recollection was rather the feeling of deep connection to the place and with the moment, an intimate experience of my body engaged with the terrain, and a kind of global sensuous experience of the environment. True, in retrospect I could, and did, frame the events in a narrative, intoning the names of the peaks I'd climbed and the topographic contours I'd followed to enchain the summits. Likewise, I could abstract and recollect individual scents, sounds, or sights that had been part of my immersion in the environment. However, that narrative sequence and those abstract sensory elements were not what I had actually experienced during most of the day.

The difference was more than that between reflecting on the activity and engaging in the activity, though that was certainly part of it. During the day I had, for awhile, been more deeply immersed in and connected with the world than was the case on either rest-days or on other, more substantial climbing routes that occupied me that summer. I'd experienced this before: on the polished floor of a *dojo* in Japan; gliding across the face of a wave in Indonesia; carving long turns on skis deep in the San Juan Mountains. Different places, different moments, but always the same kind of experience: thoroughly engaged but somehow effortless, wholly aware, deeply carnal, and fully alive. And always the same feelings: joy, wonder, connection to a particular place, the sufficiency of the moment, and a deep appreciation of and gratitude for the gift of life and the goodness of being.

In what follows, I want to reflect on these and similar experiences, which I will call examples of *vitality*. Such experiences are neither idiosyncratic (they overlap with major themes in Chinese philosophy, among other disciplines) nor mere romanticism (contemporary psychology lends credence to these accounts). Moreover, the work of French philosopher Michel Serres suggests the relevance of this issue for a variety of philosophical topics.

Nevertheless, vital experience has received relatively little attention from philosophers. The reasons for this lacuna are, no doubt, complex; but they are not entirely surprising. Academics are for the most part intellectual creatures. And if continental philosophy has laid to rest Cartesian dualism with the rise of existential phenomenology and hermeneutics, the news seems not to have reached a great many philosophers. We academics, after all, live the "life of the mind." And for many, if the body is not quite a prison-house: it remains something of secondary interest. I'm not suggesting that no continental philosophers address embodiment; Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, Nancy, Chretien, and Falque, among others, complicate the picture. However, "there is no denying that the linguistic turn to the text was often construed as a turning away from the flesh—in practice if not in principle."⁴ Moreover, while some continental figures address the body—as perceiving,

as sexed, as political—there has been almost no attention given to the active body of *vitality*.

The Experience of Vitality

One way to get at vitality would be to begin with more well-known accounts with which it shares characteristics: Abraham Maslow's notion of "peak experience,"⁸ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's account of "flow,"⁹ the Taoist concept of *wu-wei*,⁷ and related Japanese adaptations of Tao in various *dō* (ways). What all these concepts have in common—not to conflate them or engage in reductivism—is a way of being in the world in which action flows effectively but without conscious effort and, as a consequence, one has the feeling of "naturalness." To achieve this state, it is, paradoxically, essential *not* to try, to let go. Of course, just exactly how one is supposed to achieve success through "trying not to try" is a vexing question, and different accounts offer different sorts of advice.⁸

But the flow of solving a mathematical proof and the flow of consuming an excellent meal are not quite the same; and the flow of trail running in the foothills near my home is, despite similarities to the first two cases, different again. Each of these activities leads to a different sort of experience, even if all are done with *wu-wei* or flow. "Vitality," then, is a subcategory of flow or *wu-wei* that is distinguished by, among other things, a particular sort of active and bodily engagement with the world. It is not alien to flow, but a specific manifestation of it.

Of course, the body can never be fully disengaged from any activity. We are embodied beings and there is a somatic component to all the multifarious aspects of our being, down to our thinking, knowing, perceiving, and interpreting. From vigorous physical exertion to seemingly passive endeavors such as the appreciation of visual art or music, the body remains the inescapable "background" against which all our various modes of being unfold.⁹ But while the body is always engaged, it is easier to experience vitality—the bodily engagement of flow—in some activities and more difficult, often *much* more difficult, in others.

Hermeneutics and Empiricism: The Curious Case of Michel Serres

Philosophy has not been entirely indifferent to vitality. Michel Serres's idiosyncratic and challenging work touches, in several places, on the topic.¹⁰ This is, perhaps, because Serres's own life has been lived with a commitment to both the active life and the life of the mind: "No seated professor taught me productive work; the only kind of any worth, whereas my gymnastics

teachers, coaches and, later, my guides inscribed its very conditions into my muscles and bones.”¹¹

This commitment to both the body and the mind attunes Serres to the phenomenon I am calling vitality. He recounts “rare” occasions when, climbing or otherwise engaged in vigorous activity, he became surprised by a “physically supernatural joy” in which “life superlives”¹²:

I was suddenly inundated, filled, saturated, satiated, flooded over, thunderstruck with such lofty elation, continuous and sovereign, that I thought my chest was bursting, that my entire body was levitating, present in all the space of the world entire present in me. Pleroma of exaltation. There was nothing artificial in that experience, since it occurred at times when I was eating little and drinking only water, and since all my attention, nervous and muscular, was required so as not to fall: thus the ecstasy arose during an active period when reality, hard, was mobilizing the entire body.¹³

This, it seems to me, is a textbook account of the experience of vitality. The activity mobilized his entire being. Serres describes his body, nervous *and* muscular, cognitive (but not abstract or analytical) *and* carnal, absorbed in the task. That task involved intimate interaction with what Serres calls “the hard” (*le dur*)—the primary, sensuous, material givenness of reality. The experience was both a kind of self-transcending—ecstasy (*ek-stasis*), “pleroma of exaltation”—and, at the same time, a kind of grounding: “present in all the space of the world entire present in me.” Finally, he was not fully in control; the experience came upon him: he was “inundated, saturated... flooded over, thunderstruck.”

But while Serres offers us a philosophically serious treatment of something like vitality, he remains an intriguing foil for a *hermeneutics* of the carnal body. On the one hand, his work considers the body through its senses, activities, and relations—all as part of a larger philosophical itinerary deeply engaged with the figure of Hermes.¹⁴ For Serres, Hermes is the agent or operator that facilitates *rapprochement*, the bringing together of seemingly incommensurable discourses to bear on a topic of interest, making connections, building relationships, explicating, and creating.¹⁵ Yet alongside this allegiance to Hermes, Serres exhibits a pronounced distrust—manifestations of which range from disinterested to prickly to outright hostile—for philosophies of language, for phenomenology, and for the hermeneutics of critique and suspicion.¹⁶ Thus, in Serres’s work we find Hermes but not hermeneutics, or at least not hermeneutics as we’ve come to recognize it.

This general suspicion of language is a manifestation of Serres’s commitment to realism, materialism, and empiricism. His early studies were in mathematics, and he maintained an abiding interest in the sciences. Even

when he turned to literature and philosophy, his interests left him isolated from the mainstream philosophical trends of his youth.¹⁷ In a generation increasingly fascinated with the constructed nature of reality, Serres's intellectual commitments left him an unapologetic realist:

Without being able to prove it I believe, like soothsayers and haruspices, and like scientists, that there exists a world independent of men. No one knows how to demonstrate the truth of this proposition, which we might like to call realist, since it exceeds language and thus any utterance which might demonstrate its proof. [However,] realism is worth betting on, whereas idealism calls for demonstration.¹⁸

For Serres, realism requires—though is not captured solely by—a good dose of empiricism. Although we can “make do without empiricism,”¹⁹ we do so at the cost of carnal, sensuous life: “I don't believe that if there is any sense to life, it lies in the word *life*; it rather... arises in the senses of the living body.”²⁰ Sensation via language is the idiom of “statues”: figures built by philosophers, detached from sensuous, carnal, vital life, whose experience is systematic, analytic, more dead than alive.²¹ Such effigies have fundamentally different experiences:

Garden or boarding school? A fork in the road of child-rearing...

If you wish to train an army of statues socially dedicated to the struggle for dominance, give them a poor, dry lexicon, as hard as wood and as cold as iron, studded with technical jargon like an endless refrain, form their senses through these words, give them access to the given through this language... As they begin their existence, children will shield their eyes when they raise them towards the patch of sky visible at the top of the well shaft which is their school-prison...

If [rather] you form their words through the senses, amidst the hawthorn and primrose, if rose, in all its declensions, can be related to the exploding, fragrant bouquet of shapes and hues, if you build their language through the given, then anything can happen. Even a poet. Even a happy adult; even a wise one....²²

Provocative stuff. Sure to raise the ire of hermeneutic philosophers focused on “texts.” However, Serres's work is not, I'll contend, quite as allergic to the phenomenological and hermeneutic project as it might appear at first blush. He confesses that he is not interested in following certain contemporary philosophical movements, and is therefore ignorant regarding certain details of their development.²³ This leads, I believe, to a critique of phenomenology and hermeneutics that paints with too broad a brush. Nevertheless it is very difficult not to take seriously his point about the life of the academic and the nature of professional philosophy. The oddity of reflecting on life rather

than living it is the source of myriad comic stereotypes of the academy: too much phenomenology, not enough perception; too much reflection, not enough experience. The un-lived life is not worthy of examination.

I want to suggest that it would be useful to think of Serres as a kind of “hermeneutic empiricist,” and that explicitly developing such a position is an important task, and that vitality and related experiences are an instructive example for this approach. This approach is “hermeneutic” insofar as, taking Hermes as a guide, it foregrounds the significance of interpretation—conceived broadly to include perspective, bodily orientation, and similar examples of filtered or mediated experience—in understanding both our way of knowing and our way of being in the world. Such a broadened conception is one way of speaking about what I have come to think of as hermeneutics “beyond the metaphor of the text,” an approach committed to uncovering and understanding the various modulations, translations, and transformations that our experience and knowledge undergo as they traverse the folded and variegated landscape of what Serres calls “mixed reality.” This approach would be “empirical” in the etymological and original sense of a form of knowledge that is grounded in experience (*empeiría*), especially our embodied and sensuous experience of “hard” reality. Our primary engagement with reality—primary taken here as “first,” “omnipresent,” and “most fundamental”—is our carnal, embodied, sensuous experience of reality.²⁴

Carnal Seraphim: The Body as Mediator and Messenger

Hermes, as is well known, is the patron of hermeneutics—the god of speech, writing, and eloquence, but also the god of travel, exchange, invention, and translation. Hermes’s trade involves travel, from place to place and from idiom to idiom, which for Serres largely means travel between science and the social or human sciences in a way that results in a “general theory of relations.”²⁵ His emphasis is less on the translation from one language to the other and more on the relationship forged between two spheres in the process of traveling back and forth between them. It’s not a matter of restating, philosophically, what science says about its subject matter. Nor of philosophy (or the humanities more broadly) serving as a mere town crier or press secretary for the truth that science reveals.²⁶ It is, rather, a way of considering what is captured and what is missed by, respectively, science, social science, the humanities, and even by various combinations and encounters between all three.²⁷

Hermes has an ally in this work. Angels, Serres points out, are also fundamentally messengers (*angēlōs*: messenger or envoy), and therefore perform a similar function. They too translate or transport. They are messengers between different worlds: traversing the heavenly spheres,

translating between different idioms, both icons of difference and metaphors for bridging differences. Christianity tends to construe angels as purely spiritual beings, but in doing so we miss the sort of polyvalence to which Rilke's eyes and ears were so finely attuned.²⁸ Their role as messengers enables them to cross freely between transcendence and immanence: they are beings who wrestle (Genesis 32: 24-39), who feed others (1 Kings 19:4-8), and who, most dramatically, embrace and touch in a manner that is distinctly carnal and sensuous (captured vividly in the works of St. Teresa, and in Bernini's depiction of her ecstasies).²⁹ The glory of angels is immanent as well as transcendent, and recognizing this carnal aspect Serres often describes the *human body* as angelic.³⁰ Here he allies himself with Hamlet: "in action"—not disembodied reason, not imagination—"how like an angel." In "apprehension"—which is first and foremost our primary, sensuous perception or grasp of something (from the Latin "to seize," *ad-prehendere*), rather than calculated reflection or argument—"how like a god."³¹ The flesh, mysterious, "participates in divinity."³²

How is the body angelic? It occupies a privileged place in which the hard (*le dur*) and the soft (*le doux*) intersect, exchange, comingle, and catalyze.³³ The hard is the given: the physical and material world; reality independent of human perception of it; reality "as if I were dead"³⁴; the "inhuman" cosmos.³⁵ The soft, in contrast, is the sphere of culture, language, signs, and more generally human accounts of reality. As angelic, the body mediates between the hard and the soft, nature and culture, material reality and language: transmitting, transgressing, translating, and transfiguring. But, more than this, the body actually helps to effect the process by which the hard becomes soft and, perhaps more surprisingly, the soft becomes hard.

The body is one example of what Serres calls a "black box," a mysterious arrangement that carries out transformations from the hard to the soft. Hard reality comes in one side of the box, and soft concepts come out the other:

The box transforms the world into coloured pictures, into paintings hanging on walls, changes the landscape into tapestry, the city into abstract compositions. Its function is to replace the sun with heaters and the world with icons. The sound of the wind with gentle words.³⁶

That we tend to soften the hard is, I suspect, unsurprising. Continental philosophy has long been fascinated with the ways in which we contribute to the "creation" of the world. The lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) is the dynamic, horizontal background of all possible experience³⁷, and this background is hermeneutically structured in certain ways by signs, symbols, metaphors, and narratives, as well as reason.

However, carnal hermeneutics illustrates that translation and transformation between the hard and the soft happens in a variety of different ways.³⁸ The black box of the body is not a unidirectional system with a single operation: the transformation of the hard to the soft; it accomplishes the transmutation of the soft to the hard as well. It is true that we “soften” reality, which takes its most problematic form when we take various sorts of abstractions from reality to be reality itself³⁹; but we also “harden” reality any time a person has an idea or concept (soft) and, based on that idea, constructs or otherwise alters hard reality. Take, for example, the complex transformations—both hardening and softening—associated with cuisine. The hard reality of nature (e.g., chicken, wine, mushrooms, garlic, herbs) becomes an expression of culture (e.g., *coq au vin*) and, simultaneously, the soft idea of a culture (e.g., “Frenchness”) becomes manifest in hard reality.

But we must be careful, because talk of “the” hard and “the” soft might suggest we are reinstating metaphysical dualism or engaging in a facile sort of binary thinking. As I’ve made clear elsewhere, the purely hard and the purely soft are nowhere to be found; we have, rather, degrees on a spectrum of hardness and softness.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, we should not abandon the language of the hard and the soft because it is rhetorically, didactically, and philosophically useful.

The laptop computer on which I type these words and the lemon tree outside my window are both made up of the same stardust which comprises my own body, and so there are good reasons to recognize that we have no grounds for calling some of these objects “natural” and others “unnatural.” Yet “natural” and “unnatural” remain useful *and appropriate* descriptors for helping us to distinguish between a wide variety of objects, phenomena, and actions. Similarly, it remains useful, even essential, to recognize aspects, parts, or experiences of that reality as either harder (reality imposed on us, reality to which we must conform, reality “as if we were dead,” and so on) or softer (meaningful reality, experienced reality, reality ‘while we are here’ and ‘with which we are involved’), all the while recognizing that there is only one reality.

The black box filters both the hard and the soft without blind allegiance to either. Its functions are both carnal and hermeneutic; or, better, its hermeneutic functions *are* carnal, and its carnality *is* hermeneutic. This is appropriate given that we encounter not the purely hard or purely soft, but rather various sorts of “mixed reality.”

The Black Box of Vitality

The body is always engaged, and interpretation of some sort is always going on, but this is not to say that the operations of the black box unfold in a

uniform manner in all of the body's various activities and engagements with the world. Different activities, and different ways of conducting similar activities, engage the body in different ways.⁴

Flow and *wu-wei* reveal certain truths about the world and our experience of it, and vitality—the type of flow characterized by active, carnal engagement with the material world—reveals certain of these truths in an exemplary manner. Vitality connects us with cords—to use another of Serres's tropes—to both soft relations and hard reality.⁵ It is a form of carnal hermeneutics that constitutes, as it were, a specific configuration of settings for the operations of the black box; the box retains its general function, but vitality accomplishes these transformations in unique ways.

(a) *Undifferentiated Sensation*

Flow, *wu-wei*, and vitality illustrate the degree to which our primary sensuous experience is undifferentiated. That is to say, the degree to which our primary experience of the world is sensuous experience, understood globally or comprehensively, prior to being broken up into the experience of sights, sounds, smells, textures, and tastes. Reality is mixed, and that is how we experience it prior to a moment of reflection or rupture that causes us to focus on some particular ingredient of reality or our experience of it.

Take, for example, the experience of taste, which is perhaps the most obviously synesthetic or conesthetic of the senses. When “tasting,” it is almost impossible to disentangle taste, smell, and touch; the flavor, the aromas, and the texture are more or less indistinguishable in our primary experience. To say that we taste food—if by “taste” we mean something qualitatively different from smell, touch, and so forth—is at best an abstraction, a selective filtering of a more global or comprehensive experience as it moves through the black box. Such abstraction can serve a purpose, as when an oenophile wants to describe the complexity of oak, berries, or tobacco she smells in the aroma of a Bordeaux from the body of the wine she feels once she takes a sip; but that same abstraction is misleading if it is taken to express a primary perception of the world via independent and easily distinguishable tools or techniques—taste, smell, touch—that we apply as we reach out and encounter an external and wholly independent object.

Taste, of course, is merely a telling example. Undifferentiated perception is ultimately at the root of all our experience of the world, as Merleau-Ponty, Richard Shusterman, and others have pointed out.⁶ Our initial immersion in the world does not distinguish between the five classical senses. But the fact is that we often miss this primary unity of experience because reflection tends to break it into constituent parts for purposes of emphasis or analysis, which can, it must be said, prove both illuminating and useful. However, precisely as a consequence of that utility, we are apt to overlook or forget the significance of our primary immersion in the world.

Our undifferentiated, global immersion is inescapable, and least able to be ignored, in experiences of vitality. In such cases, as Serres and other testify, the “entire body” is “inundated, filled, saturated, satiated, flooded over.” It is precisely the absorbing nature of vital experience, experienced as an inescapable imposition, that prevents us from focusing on a single sense—as might occur when the oenophile first looks for clarity, then smells for bouquet, and so on—revealing our primary, global, sensuous experience. In vitality, the mode of engagement with the world is pre-reflective, pre-analytic, and pre-skeptical.

(b) *A World*

The global nature of primordial experience is not only evident in perception, but in the perceived as well; and flow, *wu-wei*, and vitality are, again, the clearest testament to this. Rather than giving us discrete phenomena—a fact about, or slice of the world—vitality delivers us over to a complete world.

Consider, by way of analogy, Proust’s account of voluntary and involuntary memory, famously captured in his account of a *madeleine* dipped in tea, a stumble on the cobblestones outside the Guermantes’s mansion, and similar experiences. Voluntary memory is accomplished through conscious effort and brings to mind discrete facts, images, or events. Involuntary memory—the sort of memory awakened by the *madeleine*—operates not by conscious effort but rather by *letting go*, just as in *wu-wei* and vitality. And it delivers not discrete phenomena but an *entire world* (e.g., one’s childhood home in Combray, or the baptistery of St. Mark’s in Venice). Rather than the resistance we experience in the effort of conscious memory, involuntary memory is experienced naturally and spontaneously, without effort. The experience is one of the mind being “overtaken” and of an “essence” being “called into being.”⁴

With respect to his stumble on the cobblestones of Guermantes Way, Proust states explicitly the power of involuntary memory to restore an entire world:

Almost at once I recognized the vision: it was Venice, of which my effort to describe it and the supposed snapshots taken by my memory had never told me anything, but which the sensation which I had once experienced as I stood on two uneven stones in the baptistery of St. Mark’s had, recurring a moment ago [stumbling outside the Guermantes mansion], *restored to me complete with all the other sensations linked on that day to that particular sensation*, all of which had been waiting in their place—from which with imperious suddenness a chance happening had caused them to emerge—in the series of forgotten days.⁵

In such instances, memory imposes itself upon us, rather than being called into being in a narrative structured, consciously or unconsciously, by our will. The experience is “indisputable.”⁶

In a parallel manner, the experience of vitality delivers over the entire world of some particular place, not one of imagination or memory but one of active, engaged, carnal experience in the present moment. And like involuntary memory, vitality connects us not to a component, object, or sensation in the world, or even to a combination of objects, but to the world itself. Here too, we find ourselves overtaken by the experience, caught up in the “flow,” rather than directing the experience. Even if we can describe and analyze it—phenomenologically, psychologically, physiologically, and so forth—the primordial truth of the experience is participatory rather than abstract, and ineluctable rather than demonstrable.⁷

(c) *Connecting with Hard Reality*

During much of our sojourn in the world, at least in the developed global North, the inflexible demands of hard reality are well in the background of our experience. We rarely test ourselves physically, and technology allows us to be remarkably sedentary and disconnected in our interactions with what Serres calls “hard” reality. Fewer and fewer of us—and very few academics—really labor with our bodies. We are largely insulated from hunger; and we can opt to eat almost anything at almost any time, regardless of the season of the year or the bioregion in which we reside. The natural rhythms of summer and winter, day and night, and even youth and age, mean relatively little to us in terms of restricting our activities. Even people of relatively humble means live with conveniences and luxuries that far surpass those enjoyed by kings and emperors of old. I’m not suggesting all these developments are regrettable; but is it any wonder that we’ve become—in a felicitous turn of phrase given Serres’s work—soft? True, hard reality eventually wins out, as Derrida’s reality “as if we were dead” comes to pass all too soon; but prior to what Seneca calls “that ultimate necessity,” it is all too easy to fool ourselves into believing that we are the masters of reality rather than subject to it.

In contrast, the sort of physical activity that elicits vitality is uncompromising in its honesty; it is a mode of engagement with the world that unfolds without distraction or subterfuge. We can be fooled by many things in the world, and we deceive ourselves about many more. But bend to lift a weight, whether a barbell or a sack of grain, and you will find that “two hundred pounds is always two hundred pounds.”⁸ There is an unflinching, merciless, direct honesty in the hard. This is the “iron law” of the “thing itself” and what it teaches us; “the thing itself... alone, commands [assent, rather than] opinion.”⁹

This inflexibility has consequences, and forces us to accommodate ourselves to reality rather than the other way around. Take, by way of

illustration, the example with which I began. Traversing the Cathedral cirque, I was forced to accept, rather than alter, hard realities. Accept a long day with little food or water, rather than being able to consume anything that struck my fancy, whether or not I was hungry. Accept the weather—bitter cold in the early morning darkness and intense, high-altitude sun with a strong, unpredictable wind in the afternoon—rather than easily adjusting the climate to my liking. And, most strikingly, forced to actually conform my body to hard reality in the act of ascending: a climber ascends rock by inserting fingers, hands, fists, or feet into cracks in the granite, employing a variety of techniques to torque, expand, or otherwise modify the shape of the limb to conform to the available space in the fissure. Here, the climber *literally* reshapes the body in order to accept what is given by hard reality; an act of carnal anamorphosis reveals a path upward that is utterly closed, invisible even, to those unwilling or unable to so adapt.⁵⁰

Finally, without intending to exaggerate or dramatize the situation, there were the hard realities of gravity and physics that I could not change, along with their potential repercussions. Consequences, Serres notes, are another distinction between the hard and the soft. In everyday life, increasingly characterized by softened forms of reality, things matter in a rather different way: "...a thousand things without importance are neither obligatory nor punished here. You do not have to pay for every detail of common life. A hundred spaces beyond the law let you do, say, or get through as you wish."⁵¹ Soft realities compromise, forgive mistakes, and in general cushion the slings and arrows of fate; hard reality, however, punishes miscalculations and mistakes. When dealing with hard reality, we must remember that "minor causes" can have "great effects": "beyond the port: shipwreck for the smallest error; once past the mountain hut: at the slightest mistake you will fall."⁵² As a consequence, "you begin to live another way."⁵³

And lest one be put off by the tendency to illustrate the consequences of hard reality with stereotypically "rugged" activities, Serres suggests that other examples conform to a similar rule: "higher mathematics, fine arts, high virtuosity, high-level mysticism, all correspond in every way to high mountains or the high seas, worlds where the cords [binding us to hard reality, to others, or both] remain taut."⁵⁴ This "correspondence" seems to be a consequence of the fact that such endeavors require the agent to conform or otherwise show deference to the inflexible aspects of reality, including certain inescapable consequences of failure. For example, just as one cannot fool oneself or others climbing—either you can ascend the pitch or you cannot—one cannot fake or deceive Ravel's *Jeux d'Eau* or Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No.2*. Either you can play the piece or you cannot.

So, vitality reveals our primary engagement with hard reality, before the softening of reflection, language, symbols, and narratives gets fully underway and accelerates.⁵⁵ And it does not view hard reality abstractly—

poetically, scientifically, or otherwise; it engages hard reality as directly as possible: carnally, sensuously, physically.

(d) *The Thinking Body*

Perhaps the most provocative insight to arise from careful reflection on vitality is that we must recognize the ways in which the body “thinks,” “knows,” “understands,” and, indeed, possesses a kind of “wisdom.” Such claims fly in the face of 2500 years of philosophy—at least in the West—which insists that thinking is done with the mind, and done best precisely when freed from the distractions of the body. The body, insists Plato, is a “prison house” for the soul,⁵ and is an “obstacle when one associates with it in the search for knowledge.”⁶ But Chinese and Japanese philosophy have pursued the topic of a thinking or understanding body for thousands of years. And contemporary research in neurobiology and psychology supports this work, articulating the various ways in which the body chooses or acts *prior* to deliberation, or even conscious attention.⁸

Vitality teaches us at least two important hermeneutic lessons: (1) that in certain circumstances success hinges on getting the mind out of the body’s way; and, (2) that the world is, on some basic level, worthy of our trust.⁹ Let’s then conclude by briefly considering each of these.

The first thing vitality teaches us is that the *body* knows and understands the world, and that, at least in some cases, bodily understanding is superior to rational understanding. As Serres suggests: “Go, run, faith will come to you, the body will sort things out.”¹⁰ But the body sorts things out best when the mind—analysis and conscious reflection—gets out of its way: “To inhabit your body better, forget it, at least in part...”¹¹ In certain instances, insight or success hinges, *pace* Plato, on quieting the mind rather than escaping the body. The forgetfulness that Serres speaks of is not an escape from carnality, but rather a manner of being embodied that allows the body to act without the mind second-guessing or micro-managing the situation. True, bodily understanding can certainly err and it is not appropriate for all circumstances; but it is all-too-clear that reason can err as well, and there are contexts in which forgetting oneself and allowing the body to flow undeniably results in judgments that are both more swift and more accurate. A *coup de corps*, so to speak, rather than merely *d’oeil*.

The most famous example of this with respect to *wu-wei* is the story of “Cook Ting” in the *Chuang Tzu*, one of the canonical texts of Taoism. Cook Ting is called on to butcher an ox, and does so with such marvelous skill and grace that all are astonished. Ting confesses that—because he does not actually cut, or hack, or otherwise force his will on the carcass, but rather inserts the blade following the natural spaces between the joints—his blades have not required sharpening for over nineteen years. He meets no resistance when performing his work, but “the flesh falls apart like a lump

of earth falling to the ground.”⁵² Here, and in more contemporary instances documented by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and others, success flows from not over-thinking things, from letting the body act naturally. And such understanding has implications far beyond butchery or sport; as Lord Wen Hui exclaims after watching Cook Ting work, “I have learned how to live life fully.”⁵³

Ed Casey’s treatment of the “glance” offers us a parallel analysis.⁵⁴ The glance embraces just the sort of pre-reflective understanding I have associated with vitality, albeit in what Casey recognizes as an oculo-centric mode. Casey—paralleling without mentioning Proust and Serres—emphasizes the degree to which the glance reveals, precisely because of its openness and spontaneity, things that would not show up under the penetrating gaze of direct vision. This deference to the things that show themselves is not unlike Serres’s admiration for soothsayers and haruspices, which operate with an attitude of trust in the world prior to, as Casey has it, attempts to “penetrate the thing” or “go behind” it in a move of suspicion.⁵⁵

Thus, the second thing vitality teaches us is that the world is, to a significant degree, trustworthy. Here the foil for vitality would be overblown instances of “hermeneutics of suspicion” suggesting that our senses, our bodies, and reality itself are fundamentally untrustworthy and lead us to error. Suspicion, of course, has proved enormously productive, whether we look at scientific skepticism used to demand the replicability of experimental proof, or the work of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud chipping away at accreted dogmatism masquerading as objective fact. However, if all we do is tear things down, we will be left with precious little. The problem, as I’ve suggested elsewhere, is that certain strains of hermeneutics take “avoid error”—rather than “seek the truth”—to be the fundamental epistemological rule.⁵⁶ And seeking to avoid error at all cost leads us to over-value suspicion.

Of course, suspicion *per se* is not the problem; the problem is when suspicion is elevated to the status of first, last, and only principle. The hermeneutics of suspicion is essential, whether applied to cultural traditions or sensuous engagement with the world. However, as Paul Ricoeur noted it must be supplemented by a hermeneutics of affirmation—not in a manner that suggests blind approval or naïveté, but rather as part of an ongoing negotiation between suspicion and affirmation, critique and conviction, so that each affirmation is a *second* (or third, or *n*th) naïveté that takes up affirmation in light of changes wrought by suspicion.

Vitality—because it engages us with hard reality “directly”⁵⁷ (i.e., prior to suspicion), and because that engagement is uncommonly penetrating and successful—reminds us that we should not entirely repudiate our initial trust in the world. It is true that our senses can and do deceive us; but for every instance of seeing stick “bend” when inserted in water, there are

innumerable instances of our senses operating perfectly well.⁶ Moreover, reason—lauded as that which corrects our supposedly unreliable senses—is fully capable of its own errors. Reason, in fact, often steers us wrong, acting like a lawyer or press secretary seeking to justify acts, opinions, or judgments *ex post facto*, rather than acting like an objective judge.⁶ That our primary sensuous engagement with the world is so regularly accurate, and that rational abstractions about the world are at least sometimes in error, should win for the world and for our bodies at least a measure of our trust.⁷

Is this the “thinking body” or the “embodied mind”? It is both, of course. And while vitality is far from the only manifestation of this comingling of the carnal and the cognitive, it is one that offers particularly telling insights for a hermeneutics “beyond the metaphor of the text,” simultaneously reconnects us with the flesh of the body, the hardness of reality, and the fittedness of the one for the other.

¹ John Donne, Sermon II, Preached in the Evening of Christmas Day, 1624, page five. See *The Sermons of John Donne*

<<http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/JohnDonne/id/3210/rec/2>>. Accessed February 15, 2016.

² This moderation seems essential to flow, at least as characterized by Csikszentmihalyi. Enchaining the peaks of the Cathedral cirque is not particularly challenging; but, when soloing, it is enough to focus one’s attention. Achieving flow during activities that are either more challenging or less challenging is substantially more difficult.

³ Plato, “Phaedo” in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981), 98, Bekker 62b. A colleague once confided to me that he thought of his body mainly as tool to carry his brain from one room to another. Obviously, such hyper-intellectual dispositions color the sort of experiences and phenomena one finds philosophically interesting.

⁴ Richard Kearney “The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics” in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, eds. Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015). 17.

⁵ See, for example, Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 1964).

⁶ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990).

⁷ Laozi, *Daodejing*, trans. Edmund Ryden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁸ Confucius, *Analects*, Internet Classics Archive

< <http://classics.mit.edu/Confucius/analects.1.1.html>>. Accessed June 22, 2105. *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Martin Palmer, with Elizabeth Breuilly, Chang Wai Ming, and Jay Ramsey (New York: Penguin Books, 1996). Laozi, *Daodejing*, trans. Edmund Ryden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). *Mencius*, trans. D.C. Lau (New York: Penguin, 1970), 83. Confucius

argues that it is only after a lifetime of the most focused, conscious effort—including scrupulous attention to detailed rituals circumscribing one’s action in almost every imaginable sphere—that our desires and values will be so ordered that we can act virtuously without trying. The *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi*—the foundational texts of Taoism—emphasize precisely the opposite strategy. Achieving effortless action and the loss of self in a greater whole comes about not through conscious effort and striving, but rather through simply “letting go,” emptying oneself so that the Way (*Tao*) can become manifest. Finally, Mencius offers a position between conscious, disciplined Confucian training and the Taoist celebration of natural flow. He suggests that the *beginnings* of virtue are in us naturally as seeds that we must cultivate and help to grow. For a clear summary of these sources with respect to *wu-wei*, see: Edward Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try* (New York: Broadway Books, 2014).

- ⁹ See Richard Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), especially 47-67.
- ¹⁰ Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), see especially the last chapter, “Joy” in *Variations on the Body*, trans. Randolph Burks (London: Continuum, 2008); *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. Francis Cowper (Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1995); *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2008)—particularly the final section on “casting off”; and *The Troubadour of Knowledge* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).
- ¹¹ Serres, *Variations on the Body*, 33. See here the echo of Confucius and Mencius, treated above. On the connections between an active life of labor and the life of the mind, the life and works of Eric Hoffer offer many insights.
- ¹² Serres, *Variations on the Body*, 15-16.
- ¹³ Serres, *Variations on the Body*, 16. Interestingly, climbing is perhaps one of the more frequent examples of flow cited in the psychological research.
- ¹⁴ That the body remains one of the significant foci in his work is clear from his own assessment: “I’m faithfully pursuing the project of mingling. Notice the title of *Les cinq sens: philosophie des corps mêlés*, vol. 1. You only have to add to all my other books ‘volume 2,’ ‘volume 3,’ and so on” (*Conversations* 165). Among Serres’s most well-known works are the five volume *Hermès*. See also: Michel Serres, *Hermès: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, eds. Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. Francis Cowper (Paris: Flammarion, 1995); and, again, Serres and Latour’s, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*.
- ¹⁵ Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, 62-66, 101, 108-123.
- ¹⁶ Serres finds the axiomatic logic of contemporary analytic philosophy similarly risible. For more on Serres’s relationship to phenomenology, see Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, 8, 9, 28, 125 ff., and, for an exceptionally biting example, 151.
- ¹⁷ See Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, 1-76 passim.
- ¹⁸ Serres, *The Five Senses*, 102.
- ¹⁹ Serres, *The Five Senses*, 195.
- ²⁰ Ibid.

- ²¹ See Serres, *The Five Senses*, 188-199, and Michel Serres, *Statues*, trans. Randolph Burks (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), as well as Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Treatise of Sensations* (The Favril Press, 1930). Ultimately, however, I believe Serres argues that there are two broad types of language: language that betrays the hard and language that remains faithful to the hard. The question is whether a given language or mode of expression is built on and faithful to the given, or whether one's experience of the given is accessed purely through language. Thus, there can be poets or philosophers whose language remains connected to the world, who are not reducible to effigies.
- ²² Serres, *The Five Senses*, 192. Later, he quips, "Empiricism produces people worth spending time with, people who are alive, with supple, cohesive bodies, recognizable at the first beat of a waltz" (Serres, *The Five Senses*, 229). He continues: "[Empiricism] is, without doubt, little given to instruction, leading to neither higher understanding nor great speeches. But it gives small pleasures which make up the uninterrupted tonality of life, the comfort of our body, the rhythm of our gait..." (ibid.).
- ²³ See, for example, Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, 38, 130, 134, etc. I'm not suggesting we can dismiss Serres's thought—which is rich and provocative—on the basis of such offhand comments. However, while it seems fair to say that some of his criticisms would not change dramatically, even with more familiarity, it also seems fair to say that some of his criticisms seem to ignore relevant differences between styles of hermeneutics (e.g., Ricoeur and Derrida).
- ²⁴ Of course, this is not to claim that empiricism cannot deceive us, or that empiricism should always trump other ways of knowing or experiencing, or that empiricism alone gets us to the truth. Different modes of knowing and experiencing are appropriate to different circumstances—mixed reality calls for a mixed epistemology. Nor is the claim that empiricism can be easily disentangled from other ways of knowing and experiencing, so that we could neatly partition and isolate the empirical and poetic elements in one's experience.
- ²⁵ Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, 66, 149-154, and 127.
- ²⁶ As is often the case in instances of sloppy "interdisciplinarity." See Ted Toadvine, "Six Myths of Interdisciplinarity" in *Thinking Nature*, vol. 1 (2011).
- ²⁷ See Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, 165, as well as summaries of Serres's treatment of "Jupiter" at 149 ff.
- ²⁸ "Every angel is terrible" (Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegy 1*).
- ²⁹ See *The Life of St. Teresa of Avila* (Chapter 29 is a good representative example). <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/teresa/life.i.html>>. Accessed February 4, 2015).
- ³⁰ Serres, *Variations*, 61, 131, 150-151, and *The Five Senses*, 173.
- ³¹ *Hamlet*, act II, scene 2. Emphases mine.
- ³² Serres, *Variations*, 61.
- ³³ See, for a fine exploration of these categories, Steven Connor, "Michel Serres: The Hard and the Soft," a talk given at the Centre for Modern Studies, University of York, 26 November 2009. <<http://www.stevenconnor.com/hardsoft/>>. Accessed February 15, 2016.
- ³⁴ See John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 189-196. Also see *Applying: To Derrida*, eds. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins, and Julian Wolfreys (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

- ³⁵ See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).
- ³⁶ Serres, *The Five Senses*, 146.
- ³⁷ “In whatever way we may be conscious of the world as universal horizon, as coherent universe of existing objects, we, each ‘I-the-man’ and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and this world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this ‘living together’.” (Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970], 108).
- ³⁸ See my “Mind the Gap: The Challenge of Matter” in *Carnal Hermeneutics*, eds. Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015). Also see Serres, *The Five Senses*, 165-167.
- ³⁹ This would be an example of what Gabriel Marcel calls “the spirit of abstraction” (see Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, trans. G.S. Fraser [Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1967], 55, 156, etc.).
- ⁴⁰ See “Mind the Gap: The Challenge of Matter,” 69-70.
- ⁴¹ Here it is worth noting an interesting implication of hermeneutics, as I have characterized it, “beyond the text”: the significance of embodiment vis-à-vis emplacement. Hermeneutics has rightly made much of differences in the ways that cultures, traditions, and narratives shape one’s horizons. But those differences, while significant, seem minor compared to the differences by which different bodies, human and non-human, perceive the world. What presents us with a greater hermeneutic difference: the distinction between Protestant and Catholic, or the distinction between human and, say, gorilla, dolphin, or salmon?
- ⁴² Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 97 ff. “If the mountain finally turns out to be difficult, appallingly tough, then the contact itself takes on a different function: it no longer binds just the mountaineers among themselves, but in addition anchors itself to the rock face at specific strong points” (Ibid., 104). Here the corde connects us not only to our ropemates, a social contract among people, but also to the rock, the hard reality of the world.
- ⁴³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1989). Richard Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- ⁴⁴ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume I, Swan’s Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 60-64, and *In Search of Lost Time, Volume VI, Time Regained*, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 255-257.
- ⁴⁵ Proust, *Time Regained*, 256. Emphases mine. This account cannot help but bring to mind the discussion of “unstable equilibrium” in Serres’s *Variations on the Body* (45-47, 137-138, etc.).
- ⁴⁶ Proust, *Swann’s Way*, 61.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid. Here calling to mind St. Exupéry: “truth is not that which is demonstrable, but that which is ineluctable” (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars*, trans. Lewis Galantière [New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1992], 218). Proust says similarly that his insights—or perhaps “epiphanies” to use an alternative, evocative term—were not the result of a “new train of reasoning” nor the result of a compelling or “decisive argument” (Proust, *Time Regained*, 255). Rather, the physical experience of stumbling on cobblestone had delivered a truth in the face of

which all his previous difficulties (in finding that truth) dropped away. This is not to suggest that some truths are not demonstrable, or that we should not seek to verify, in whatever way is appropriate to the case, potential truths; it is to say that there are some things that are true that are not susceptible to demonstration in the modern sense of proof but which are, nonetheless, ineluctable.

⁴⁸ Henry Rollins, “The Iron” in *Details Magazine*, January 1993. An honest insight from a punk-rock, spoken-word icon that is reflected directly in Serres’s account of the “iron law” of hard reality (see note 49 below).

⁴⁹ “...the researcher who cheats or lies neither finds nor invents, just as the high jumper neither cheats nor lies with gravity... this iron law turns its back on every practice on the part of the collectives whether professional, political, media, or academic... that crown mobsters and puts the mediocre in power. Respect the thing itself that, alone, commands and not opinion, this above all else teaches the world-producing life” (Serres, *Variations on the Body*, 34).

⁵⁰ On anamorphosis, see Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given*, trans. Jeff Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), §13.

⁵¹ Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 112.

⁵² Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 111.

⁵³ Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 112.

⁵⁴ Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 113.

⁵⁵ By “accelerates” I am acknowledging the hermeneutic insight that we can never, ultimately, experience reality directly and unmediated, but also deferring for another essay a more substantive account of the limits of hermeneutics based on the metaphor of the text (symbol, language, metaphor, narrative) and a more complete account of hermeneutics beyond the metaphor of the text (based in carnal embodiment, sensuous perception, material place, and so on).

⁵⁶ Plato, “Phaedo,” 98, Bekker 62b.

⁵⁷ Plato, “Phaedo,” 101, Bekker 65b.

⁵⁸ This is certainly evident in cases of habit and training, as in Serres’s examples, but it is also the case in situations in which hard reality surprises us. Anyone who has had the experience of being a few rungs down on the food chain in the presence of apex predators can attest that the experience is, especially at the outset, as close to pre-linguistic (i.e., hard) as we are capable of having. The hermeneutics of *nous* withdraws and the hermeneutics of the *soma* emerges; the hermeneutics of the Axial Age, Renaissance, and Enlightenment give way to the hermeneutics of the early Pleistocene. For other examples, consider the cases discussed in: Casey, *The World at a Glance*; Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*; Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005); and Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). Needless to say, this does not mean that the pre-cognitive judgment is always correct, or even always better than the reflective judgment.

⁵⁹ Additionally, though I cannot address this fully here, in vital action we experience a world to which our bodies are well-adapted, a world for which we were made, a world in which we belong and which we experience not in *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness), but rather in *Heimelige* (hominess). This experience is a unique form of authenticity tied to our embodiment, our worldliness, and our creatureliness—an acceptance of what we are and an appreciation for

where we are. Not surprisingly then, the mood (*Stimmung*) associated with vitality is not Angst, but joy (See my “Joy and the Myopia of Finitude” in *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, vol.8, no.1 [spring 2016]). Vitality, flow, *wu-wei*, and other forms of “peak experience” all share this characteristic: that when we are in the grip of such activity, we become detached from both the weight of the past and anxiety over the future, caught up in a moment—however long it may last—that is self-sufficient, fully justified, and profoundly good. The experience of vitality, like other experiences of joy, overcomes death, at least in this sense: in such moments death becomes, as Proust has it, a “matter of indifference” (Proust, *Time Regained*, 257). Thus Csikszentmihalyi advises: “When we are unhappy, depressed, or bored we have an easy remedy at hand: to use the body for all it is worth” (Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 94).

⁶⁰ Serres, *Variations*, 78.

⁶¹ Serres, *Variations*, 42.

⁶² *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, 23.

⁶³ Ibid. “This remark signals to us that we should be taking the story of the ox as a metaphor: we are Butcher Ding’s blade, and the bones and ligaments of the ox are the barriers and obstacles that we face in life” (Edward Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try* [New York: Broadway Books, 2014], 21). Consider, as another example, the Japanese Zen Buddhist practice of drawing the *ensō* (circle).

⁶⁴ Ed Casey, “The World at a Glance” in *Chiasmus*, eds. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000); and *The World at a Glance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).

⁶⁵ Casey, “The World at a Glance,” 148.

⁶⁶ As William James notes: “There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion, — ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. *We must have the truth*; and *we must avoid error*. — these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws. Although it may indeed happen that when we believe the truth *A*, we escape as an incidental consequence from believing the falsehood *B*, it hardly ever happens that by merely disbelieving *B* we necessarily believe *A*” (William James, *The Will to Believe* [New York: Dover Publications, 1956], 18).

⁶⁷ I should stress, again, that I have no interest in establishing or reestablishing a dualism or binary of the hard and the soft. It can be useful to distinguish between hard(er) and soft(er) reality, while nevertheless remembering that all reality is “mixed.” Similarly, without suggesting direct or unmediated contact, we can say that vitality connects us to the world in *more* direct and primary manner, one *less* modified by abstraction or reflection.

⁶⁸ And not only in simple examples like recognizing that a “small” tree is actually just far away, but also in exceptionally complex and apparently reflective endeavors like identifying art forgeries or implementing strategies, in sport or armed conflict. Again, see Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow*. For some accessible examples, see Gladwell’s *Blink*. The ubiquity and accuracy of such “pre-cognitive” judgments leads Gladwell to conclude that “thin-slicing” (Gladwell, *Blink*, 23) patterns and making judgments on a pre-reflective level is far from extraordinary; rather it is a “central part of what it means to be human” (Ibid., 43).

⁶⁹ For some interesting examples, see “How Do Conservatives and Liberals View the World?,” interview and transcript on *Moyers and Company*, February 3, 2012, accessed April 15, 2012, <http://billmoyers.com/episode/how-do-conservatives-and-liberals-see-the-world/>. Also see

Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon, 2012).

⁷⁰ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, who suggested a number of helpful revisions of an earlier draft of this paper.