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Freshman Seminar: Meaning of Life
Professor Cherkasova

Collection of Questions and Quotes

Ecclesiastes

1. *"Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive." (Eccl., 4:2) "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart." (Eccl., 7:2) "Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun." (Eccl., 9:6)*

Why do we idolize those who pass away and neglect those who are still alive? Is it a contradiction to criticize the worship of the deceased and then encourage us to visit the house of mourning? I realize it may help one come to terms with their mortality, but as whole these messages seemed mixed. Intrinsic values do not carry over past death, so while they are more valuable than instrumental values, are they still equally futile?

2. *"For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart takes not rest in the night. This is also vanity." (Eccl., 2:23)*

Does this mean that the nights I spend categorizing the worries in my head are being wasted? If I lay there with an empty mind, is that also vanity?

3. *"And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleases God shall escape from her, but the sinner shall be taken by her." (Eccl., 7:26)*

Why is death personified as a woman? There was very little mention of women other than this and it made me uncomfortable somehow. While the imagery is good, I remain unsettled.

4. *"For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this is also vanity."* (Eccl., 7:6)

This is my favorite line from this selection of text. It vaguely reminds me of the witches' spell in Macbeth.

5. *"Better is it that you should not vow, than that you should vow and not pay."* (Eccl., 5:5)

Would it be unreasonable if this lead me to believe that it is less of a sin to not be exposed to/believe in God than to understand and believe in his commandments and still sin?

6. *"All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again."* (Eccl., 3:20)

"Same old song, just a drop of water in an endless sea
All we do crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see
Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind"
(If Ecclesiastes had a band.)

Nicomachean Ethics - Aristotle

1. *"...Clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking,"* (Aristotle.,p23)

I find it interesting that he seems to be searching for finality, not eternity as is easy to do. Personally I would say humanity's Telos would be to catalog the universe, as we are the only beings that obsessively collect history, literature, and scientific data. Individuals would contribute to the enlightening of the world through the enlightenment of themselves.

2. *"Nor, again, is he many-coloured and changeable;" (Aristotle.,p26) "First place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character." (Aristotle.,p29)*

I loathe the idea of humans being anything less than incredibly mentally/emotionally dynamic. Not being subject to change is a fault, not a virtue. However, I could understand requiring a strong moral standing that does not change or bow to the situation at hand.

3. *"For the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances, as a good general makes the best military use of the army at his command...And if this is the case, the happy man can never become miserable; though he will not reach blessedness." (Aristotle.,p26)*

We had previously discussed whether or not people had control over their lot in life, where they "end up". I don't think this quote encapsulates the confusion of life and the complications of sharing an existence, but it does lend an optimistic hand to people who believe that those even in the worst of places can be "happy", can thrive.

Epicurus

1. *"Accustom yourself to believing that death is nothing to us...death is the privation of all sentience; therefore a correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of*

life enjoyable... For life has no terrors for him who has thoroughly understood that there are no terrors for him in ceasing to live. Foolish, therefore is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the process." (Epicurus.,p46)

I've always answered the question "Are you afraid of Death?" in the same way. I'm not afraid of death because I know that when I die my consciousness will cease to continue, and I will not be able to be upset about my nonexistence. Another question: Is Death Telos or can we fall into nothingness without reaching our chief goal, our "end"?

2. *"Much worse is he who says that it were good not to be born, but when once on is born to pass quickly through the gates of Hades. For if he truly believes this, why does he not depart from life?" (Epicurus.,p47)*

I wasn't planned. My parents were always unhappy together, so I often felt as if I had tied them together with my existence for two decades longer than was healthy for their own pursuit of happiness. I believe it would be better for at least three people in a major way if I had not been born. I don't want to depart from life however, not because I am afraid, but because I want to earn my time here.

3. *"Every pain is easy to disregard; for that which is intense is of brief duration, and those bodily pains that last long are mild." (Epicurus.,4.p52) "Diseases of long duration allow an excess of bodily pleasure over pain." (Epicurus.,3)*

I feel as if this is untrue. Pains that have no secession aren't mild or easily disregarded. Extended life expectancies probably would have changed the Epicurean outlook on pain. On the next page it is said, "When confronted by evil nature is weak, but not when faced with good; for pleasures make it secure but pain ruins it." (Epicurus.,37) Is pain easy to disregard or is it ruinous?

4. *"Injustice is not an evil in itself, but only in consequence of the fear which is associated with the apprehension of being discovered by those appointed to punish such actions."*
(Epicurus.,36.p51)

Does this mean that injustice is only evil if the inflictor is aware of it and feels either guilt or fear of the consequences? Is injustice not inherently evil?

5. *"We place a high value on our characters as if they were our own possessions whether or not we are virtuous and praised by other men. So, too, we must regard the characters of those around us if they are our friends."* (Epicurus.,15.p53)

This reminds me of something I read. One's self-image is essential to their being, and the fastest way to offend someone is to mess with it.

Epictetus

1. *"Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions."* (Epictetus.,p58) *"...if it concerns anything not in our control, be prepared to say that it is nothing to you."* (Epictetus.,p58) *"If you kiss your child, your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not will not be disturbed if either of them dies."* (Epictetus.,p59)

Epictetus seems to have a less dynamic and less materialistic view of things. His answer to the profile question "are people fully responsible for where they end up" would probably be a resounding no. He seems to think that if you do not care about anything, nothing can hinder your life. I was reminded of Epicurus' ideas of dealing with death through reason and apathy. Epictetus' method of distancing himself from the things he loves and cannot control seems more excessive and detrimental than Epicurus' did however.

2. *"Use only the appropriate actions of pursuit and avoidance; and even these lightly, and with gentleness and reservation."* (Epictetus.,p59)

Would Epictetus criticize ambition if we are meant to use only light, gentle action?

3. *"Is your child dead? It is returned. Is your wife dead? She is returned. Is your estate taken away? Well, and is it not likewise returned? "But he who took it away is a bad man." What difference is it to you who the giver assigns to take it back?"* (Epictetus.,p60) *"Remember that you must behave in life as at a dinner party... don't even take the things which are set before you..."* (Epictetus.,p60)

Does this mindset impede actions that would qualify as healthy grieving? Always just taking it as it comes can carry you into very unpleasant places. His philosophy is too strict; too dependent on the pride one takes in will power.

The Emperor's Handbook - Marcus Aurelius

1. *"None of them can harm me, for none can force me to do wrong against my will,"* (Aurelius.,1.p27)

This reminds me of Socrates saying that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong. Doing wrong causes suffering to the soul, which is a true form of suffering, whereas physical harm is fleeting.

2. *"The truth is this: since death and life, glory and shame, pain and pleasure, wealth and poverty, all of these happen to the good and bad alike, without making on worse or the other better, none of these things can be in itself either good or bad."* (Aurelius.,11.p30)

As Shakespeare wrote, “there is nothing either good or bad, thinking makes it so.” Good and bad are simple concepts, but it’s hard to understand how things come to be either good or bad, and the truth is that they do not. We form judgments based on how things affect our lives, but the world is not based on human judgments.

3. *“The man who pants after praise and yearns to “make history” forgets that those who remember him will die soon after he goes to his grave,” (Aurelius.,19.p45)*

I hope that I can enter the field of entertainment without any expectations, and that my goal is honestly to enrich moments of the present, because I know that “making history” is worthless and my goals should be motivated intrinsically, not through praise.

4. *“Regret is what we feel when we blame ourselves for failing to take advantage of a useful opportunity. Now, whatever is good is necessarily useful and of pressing concern to every good man, but no such man feels any regret for failing to indulge in a pleasure. Pleasure, therefore, is a neither useful nor good.” (Aurelius.,10.p93)*

This is a stark contrast to Epicurus, where pleasure was the “Alpha and Omega” of our lives...

5. *“Is it change that you fear? But what can happen without it? What is dearer to nature or more vital to the universe? ... Don’t you see, then, that the change resulting in your death is no different and similarly feeds the life of the universe?” (Aurelius.,18.p80)*

The views about change and death have this overlapping feeling of acceptance. As if everything “bad” would be fine if we could come to terms with it as a natural part of our existence; just as our birth was, our death is.

6. *"In the morning, when you can't get out of bed, tell yourself: "I'm getting up to do the work only a man can do. How can I possibly hesitate or complain when I'm about to accomplish the task for which I was born? Was I made for lying warm in bed under a pile of blankets."*

(Aurelius.,1.p53)

I think I struggle with this because I don't feel as if I'm doing what I was born to do. I feel as if I'm repeating the same tedious tasks over and over in an effort to improve my skills pertaining to those same tedious tasks. I wake up and can't get out of bed and I don't think "I'm the only one who can write this essay" The things I do feel I was born for, that are things that only I can accomplish, are devalued. Devalued by a bureaucratic environment that cares only that we punch our cards and don't cause problems; not registering pursuits that don't follow an expected path in life, and instead filling our lives with imagined goals and requirements for skills only pertaining to continuing that bureaucracy that slowly repress one's passion for life. I wasn't made to lie under a pile of blankets all day, but I wasn't made to spit out passionless works motivated by imagined necessity instead of the desire to improve myself.

7. *"Do you covet the praises of someone who three times every hour curses himself? Do you hope to please the person who isn't pleased with himself? Is he pleased with himself who regrets nearly everything he does?"* *(Aurelius.,53.p101)*

Self-deprecation and low self-esteem are signs of mental illness. If someone who couldn't find positive things about themselves made the conscious effort to praise me I would value it as much, if not more, than someone to whom self-assurance comes easily.

8. *"Good and evil lie in a rational and social being's deeds, not in his feelings. Likewise, virtue and vice are terms applied to deeds, not feelings"* *(Aurelius.,16.p106)* *"To a stone thrown up in the air, there is no evil in falling or good in rising."* *(Aurelius.,17.p107)*

Are words deeds? Good and evil are abstract and situational, if a “good man” makes a mistake with correct intentions is his action still evil? Like the stone in the air, are some wrongdoings out of our control? Are there virtues that are purely parts of personality, or must they all be applicable to actions?

9. *“A spider glories in trapping a fly---so does one man in catching a hare, another in netting a sardine, another boars, or bears, or Sarmatians? Examine their principles. Are they not all thieves and cut-throats?” (Aurelius.,10.p116)*

This confuses me, earlier he mentioned accomplishing what one was born to accomplish, is a hunter not born to hunt? Is he implying that they are stealing life?

Oration on the Dignity of Man - Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

1. *“...which draws upon him the envy, not of the brutes alone, but of the astral beings and of the very intelligences which dwell beyond the confines of the world.” “He had already adorned the supercelestial region with Intelligences, infused the heavenly globes with the life of immortal souls...”(Mirandola.,73)*

Is the belief in astral beings common during the 1400s? Are we going to revisit this topic?

2. *“...among the seats of the universe, where this new creature might dispose himself to contemplate the world.” “I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains.” (Mirandola.,74)*

This supports my earlier idea of the purpose of humanity! (My response to 1., under Aristotle, about cataloging the universe) I love the imagery of humans as the performers

in a play, there has been similar imagery in most of the works we have read, but I love humans as an audience as well.

3. *"...designated sometimes by the term "all flesh" and sometimes by the term "every creature," because he molds, fashions and transforms himself into the likeness of all flesh and assumes the characteristic power of every form of life?" (Mirandola.,75)*

Modern technology has drastically increased how accurate this statement is. We fly at incredible heights, bore deeper into the earth than any animal can, swim more swiftly, and fight with the strength and ability of beings made to do so.

The Ascent of Mont Ventoux - Francesco Petrarch

1. *"This man's taciturnity, that man's flippancy, the heavy weight an obesity of the next, the thinness and weakliness of still another were reasons to deter me. The cool lack of curiosity of one, like another's too eager interest, dissuaded me from choosing either." (Petrarch.,76-77) "We spent a day there and began our ascent this morning, each of us accompanied by a single servant." (Petrarch.,77)*

One reveals oneself through how they judge others. Petrarch balances his friends between apparent "vices". What he searches for is energy, speed, disposition, intelligence, proper weight, and level of interest. I wonder if he held his servants up to the same standards as his travelling companion?

2. *"However, having strayed far in error, you must either ascend to the summit of the blessed life under the heavy burden of hard striving, ill deferred, or lie prostrate in your slothfulness in the valleys of your sins." (Petrarch.,78)*

I was not incredibly affected by Petrarch's writing, but this insight on his climb stands out. He could not have accomplished his task without proper effort; no valley detour or servant would help him reach his goal- leaving the task entirely up to him.

Tao Te Ching - Lao Tzu

1. *"When you look for it, there is nothing to see. When you listen for it, there is nothing to hear. When you use it, it is inexhaustible." (Lao.,35) "The Tao is nowhere to be found. Yet it nourishes and completes all things." (Lao.,41) "It is like the eternal void: filled with infinite possibilities." (Lao.,4) "That which has no substance enters where there is no space. This shows the value of non-action" (Lao.,43)*

Between each atom, there is space, nothing truly touches, and what fills those spaces, is the void. Tao is translated as Way but maybe it has multiple meanings, I could also see it function as Nothingness. Since everything comes into being from nothingness, and everything eventually falls back into nothingness.

2. *"We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want." (Lao.,11) "Give evil nothing to oppose and it will disappear by itself." (Lao.,60) "Being and non-being create each other." (Lao.,2) "The unmoved is the source of all movement." (Lao.,26)*

In the same way that change and flux are natural in the universe, so is opposition. Opposition is the emptiness inside of the clay pot, if it were not for that empty space there would be no pot. Nothing would happen without opposition, as it is the driving force of the universe. Lao indicates that evil without this opposing force would vanish. Does opposition toward evil bring into being more evil?

3. *"The Master leads by emptying people's minds and filling their cores, by weakening their ambition and toughening their resolve." (Lao.,3) "Because he has no goal in mind, everything he*

does succeeds.” (Lao.,22) “He who rushes ahead doesn’t go far. He who tries to shine dims his own light.” (Lao.,24) “All of them embody the virtue of non-competition. Not that they don’t compete, but they do it in the spirit of play.” (Lao.,68) “...they are content to die of old age, without ever having gone to see it.” (Lao.,80)

I have always valued ambition, intrinsic motivation to better oneself, to reach one’s full potential. It seems as if Lao views ambition as detrimental, but I do not understand why. Relative to the philosophy of non-action, seeking out enlightenment through action is counterintuitive, but why must we sacrifice our playfully competitive role in life’s game for Lao’s ideal world? There is something wrong with becoming complacent like that. It is part of humanity to strive toward goals; it is in our nature.

4. *“There is a time for being ahead, a time for being behind, a time for being in motion, a time for being at rest, a time for being vigorous, a time for being exhausted...” (Lao.,29)*

This immediately made me think of 3:2 through 3:8 of Ecclesiastes.

5. *“He is ready for death, as a man is ready for sleep after a good day’s work.” (Lao.,50) “If you open yourself to loss, you are at one with loss, and you can accept it completely.” (Lao.,23)*

Coming to terms with both death and loss seems to be a common theme in the search for the meaning of life. This reminded me of Epictetus.

6. *“If you want to be reborn, let yourself die.” (Lao.,22)*

Do Taoists believe in reincarnation?

7. *“Violence, even well intentioned, always rebounds upon oneself.” (Lao.,30) “He enters a battle gravely, with sorrow and with great compassion, as if he were attending a funeral.”*

(Lao.,31) "There is no greater illusion than fear, no greater wrong than preparing to defend yourself, no greater misfortune than having an enemy." (Lao.,46)

To commit an act of violence while feeling such deep compassion for the world would be devastating no matter the motive.

8. *"Throw away morality and justice, and people will do the right thing." (Lao.,19)*

The more you think about concepts like morality and justice, the less you comprehend what they actually represent. As in, "The more you know, the less you understand." (Lao.,47)

9. *"In governing, don't try to control." (Lao.,8) "When the Master governs, the people are hardly aware that he exists." (Lao.,17) "Can you love people and lead them without imposing your will?" (Lao.,10) "He who has power over others can't empower himself." (Lao.,24) "Stop trying to control. Let go of fixed plans and concepts, and the world will govern itself." (Lao.,57) "Governing a large country is like frying a small fish. You spoil it with too much poking." (Lao.,60)*

There is an overwhelming amount of quotes on resisting control. I doubt the American government has a single Taoist trait.

The Way of Chuang Tzu - Chuang Tzu

1. *"My senses are idle. The spirit | free to work without plan | follows its own instinct | guided by natural line, by the secret opening, the hidden space," (Chuang.,85)*

I like the sense that humans have their own natural way of being, in the same way that nature has its "sacred" and unmarked existence, as does the human spirit, and

our instinct can drive proper action better than any amount of training or search for wisdom. It reminds me of Lao's phrases "primal identity" and "primal self".

2. *"True men breathe from their heels. Others breathe with their gullets | Half-strangled."* (Chuang.,87)

The first sentence interests me. I understand it as: true men breathe with their whole being, and take the essentials of life from nature while grounded and centered. Whereas others breathe like they eat, without simplicity and with greed, focused on the mouth and their senses.

3. *"Who knows how | To have the Void for his head | To have Life as his backbone | And Death for his tail?"* (Chuang.,88) *"So that, all around his feet a gulf | Yawns, and he stands in the Void,"* (Chuang.,93)

I love it when the word void is used! Was it Democritus who proposed the idea of atoms and the void that existed between them? Why are the words void, life, and death capitalized as if they were being personified? What does it mean to have the void for a head?

4. *"If He takes me apart | And makes a rooster | Of my left shoulder | I shall announce the dawn."* (Chuang.,88)

This and chapter 22 of Tao Te Ching both make me wonder if the Taoists believe in reincarnation.

5. *"There is a time for putting together | And another time for taking apart." "In its proper time" "in due time"* (Chuang.,88) *"Too much happiness, too much unhappiness, out of time, men are thrown off balance." "How can they find time to be human?"* (Chuang.,89)

Another thing that reminds me of Ecclesiastes words about time, and chapter 29 of Tao Te Ching. There is importance given to the progression of time, another reason why the rushing of things, or the forcing of things to completion would be against the Tao. The balance, the yin and the yang, are also important here. What I don't understand is finding time to be human. What is it to be human and why does it take time?

6. *"Now the whole world is not enough reward for the "good," nor enough punishment for the "wicked." (Chuang.,89)*

Why are good and wicked put into quotations? Is this implying that goodness and wickedness are false concepts?

7. *"Here competition begins, here the idea of excellence is born, and robbers appear in the world." "Love of wisdom leads to wise contriving. Love of knowledge leads to faultfinding." (Chuang.,89)*

What would Taoists think of Aristotle's virtues and the search for human excellence?

8. *"You delight in righteousness, and you become righteous beyond all reason." (Chuang.,89)*

How can one be righteous beyond reason?

9. *"I am told there is a sacred tortoise, Offered and canonized | Three thousands years ago," (Chuang.,90)*

Isn't there a theory of origin in which a tortoise carries the world on its back?

10. *"You cannot talk to a power politician | As if he were a wise man. If he seeks to understand you, If he looks inside himself | To find the truth you have told him, He cannot find it there. Not finding, he doubts. When a man doubts, He will kill."* (Chuang.,92)

Trump.

Leo Tolstoy

1. *"I wrote: teaching what was for me the only truth, namely, that one should live so as to have the best oneself and one's family."* (Tolstoy.,96)

I feel that if Tolstoy's one truth had been less materialistic, he wouldn't have become so entangled in the means and meaning of attaining that truth.

2. *"Very well; you will be more famous than Gogol or Pushkin or Shakespeare or Moliere, or than all the writers in the worlds ---- and what of it?"* (Tolstoy.,96)

Another view on the valueless nature of success; not based in wisdom but in depression.

3. *"I felt that what I had been standing on had collapsed and that I had nothing left under my feet."* (Tolstoy.,96) *"He knows that each step he takes confuses him more and more, but still he cannot help rushing about."* (Tolstoy.,99)

A continuation of the philosophical theme that the more knowledge one acquires, the less one truly understands the concept.

4. *"If I desired anything, I knew in advance that whether I satisfied my desire or not, nothing would come of it."* (Tolstoy.,97) *"I ceased to go out shooting with a gun lest I should be tempted*

by so easy a way of ending my life.” (Tolstoy.,97) “The two drops of honey diverted my eyes from the cruel truth...” (Tolstoy.,98)

This is a clear case of major depression and a dire existential crisis. I avoid roofs for the same reason. Aside from that he sees pleasure as a diversion instead of a virtue of life.

Arthur Schopenhauer

1. *“...we generally find pleasure to be not nearly so pleasant as we expected, and pain very much more painful.” (Schopenhauer.,100)*

This depends on how high you set those expectations, whether they are realistic, whether you can control your judgment of misfortune.

2. *“Time is continually pressing upon us, never letting us take a breath, but always coming after us, like a taskmaster with a whip.” (Schop.,100)*

His perception of time is similar to previous philosophers in that it is continuous and the means of our ends, but also very different in its personification. Where in other texts time is seen as a nearly peaceful river, naturally bringing things to shore and then sweeping them away, Schopenhauer’s time is malicious. He fights it and because of this he thinks it fights back.

3. *“we are like children in a theatre before the curtain is raised, sitting there in high spirits and eagerly waiting for the play to begin.” (Schop.,101) “The scenes of our life are like pictures done in rough mosaic.” (Schop.,108) “-when in reality we have stepped forth from life to look upon it from the outside, much after the manner of spectators at a play.” (Schop.,108)*

I will never stop loving the concept of humans as an audience, of life as a play or an art piece to be viewed, considered, and understood in some way.

4. *"Your University professors are bound to preach optimism." (Schop.,101)*

Of course they are; no one wants to cultivate pessimistic views in a young person. It could be argued that optimism isn't the full truth of things, that in teaching strictly optimistically we are being kept in the dark like prisoners in the myth of the cave, but that sort of knowledge needs to be reached independently of lectures and assignments. Pessimism is easily discovered on ones own, it's a comfort to feel hopeful, to think others are generally hopeful.

5. *"If you want a safe compass to guide you through life, and to banish all doubt as to the right way of looking at it, you cannot do better than accustom yourself to regard this world as a penitentiary." (Schop.,105)*

My first high school was designed brick for brick after a prison in the same area. Realizing this had a profound impact on how I saw the school, it made everything seem worthless, made me angry for reasons I couldn't put words to, but before this I saw the school as any other; subject to poor funding but mainly a positive institution. To see life as a penitentiary would have the same affect; to feel trapped here, forced to carry out tedious tasks, to feel guilty, it's unnecessary to carry that thought with you.

The Myth of Sisyphus - Albert Camus

1. *"He is stronger than his rock." (Camus.,111)*

Sisyphus overcomes the torment of his existence, as we overcome the particular plights that serve as our rocks.

2. *"If this myth is tragic, that is because the hero is conscious." (Camus.,111)*

If this sentiment rings true for most people, why do they fear a conscious-less afterlife? There can be no more "rocks," no eternal strife that would render us lethargic in being.

3. *"There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night."*

This reminded me of the discussion we had during the Taoist lecture, and the concept of useful things relying on the "useless" to exist and function. However, this statement means more to me that you have to have known suffering to appreciate the pleasantries of life.

The Death of Ivan Ilych - Leo Tolstoy

1. *"Besides this there was in that expression a reproach and a warning to the living. This warning seemed to Peter Ivanovich out of place, or at least not applicable to him." (Tolstoy.,115)*

This line chilled me when I reread the beginning chapters, as Ivan Ilych would very well be warning them, trying to impress upon them the reality of their mortality which he only very barely grasped himself.

2. *"In all this the thing was to exclude anything fresh and vital, which always disturbs the regular course of official business." (Tolstoy.,123) "It is as if I was going downhill while I imagined I was going up." (Tolstoy.,138)*

This is what drives him to wonder whether he lived his life "correctly" the absence of simple pleasures instead abandoned for "proper" business and a stiff lifestyle. The absence of change, of vital things put aside for details.

What the Buddha Taught - Walpola Rahula

1. *“According to the Buddha’s teaching, doubt is one of the five Hindrances to the clear understanding of Truth and to spiritual progress (or for that matter to any progress). Doubt, however, is not a ‘sin’, because there are no articles of faith in Buddhism. In fact there is no ‘sin’ in Buddhism, as sin is understood in some religions. The root of all evil is ignorance and false views.” (Rahula.,3)*

I appreciate the separate nature of faults, and evil. Lust, ill-will, physical and mental torpor and languor, restlessness/worry, and doubt can all be worked against, and cleared away like cobwebs on ones character, but they are part of everyone and each can be argued to either be necessary or unavoidable (at least before one reaches enlightenment). Whereas ignorance and false views shouldn’t be dismissed, to make no effort to understand the world and to hold strongly to false beliefs is evil indeed, because it doesn’t only hinder ones own spiritual progress, but that of others.

2. *“Mind is only a faculty or organ like the eye or the ear.” (Rahula, 21) “Consciousness is a reaction or response which has one of the six faculties (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) as its basis, and one of the six corresponding phenomena (visible form, sound, odour, taste, tangible things and mind objects, i.e. an idea or thought) as its object.” (Rahula, 23)*

I’m not sure of this, I have been clinical in my ways of thinking before, but I’m not sure of it now. The brain is so incredibly complex that we cannot fully understand it, it’s nothing like the ear which can be understood by a simple assessment of its parts. One interesting thing, for instance, is the existence of phantom limbs. When an arm has been amputated, a patient can still feel pain in the arm, sensation where there is no phenomena to cause it. The mind steals into other parts of the sensory cortex to create feelings in a nonexistent limb. The mind isn’t, in this case, a faculty responding to a stimuli or an idea, it is a force of nature. It could be capable of true consciousness.

3. *"O bhikkhus, what is the Absolute? It is, O bhikkhus, the extinction of desire, the extinction of hatred, the extinction of illusion."* (Rahula, 36)

Does your tongue hate? Do your eyes desire? Does your nose comprehend illusions? All of these words focus on the mind, the being as a whole, the self, and yet there is no self. How can one reach Nirvana if there is no distinction between one man and all men? A lot of things are used synonymously in the first few chapters, like life and 'Thirst', but life cannot be thirst because rebirth occurs after the cessation of life, and thirst is still there, otherwise you wouldn't be reborn. Is Thirst a kind of energy? Energy cannot be destroyed, only transferred or dispersed, the energy in our body continues after death, which could potentially fit into a theory of rebirth. Is the end of Thirst and the achievement of Nirvana the end of the line for that energy? Could it be the stretching of that energy beyond the possibility of reformation? One persons energy, a souls worth of energy? "detachment, cessation, Nirvana" Detachment from the body, cessation of energy, and then nonexistence?

4. *"You may see a light, but the light is not the result of your eyesight."* (Rahula, 40)

You may have a thought, but the thought is not a result of your mind? If that would work in the same fashion, what are thoughts a result of? What tailors each thought to the man, brushes it across his "sense organ" of a mind, seemingly at his will? What puts it there to sense?

Zen Parables

1. *"Time to Learn"*

A young but earnest Zen student approached his teacher, and asked the Zen Master: "If I work very hard and diligent how long will it take for me to find Zen." The Master thought about this, then replied, "Ten years." The student then said, "But what if I work very, very hard and really

apply myself to learn fast- How long then?" Replied the Master, "Well, twenty years." "But, if I really, really work at it. How long then?" "Thirty years," replied the Master. "But I do not understand," said the disappointed student. "At each time I say I will work harder, you say it will take me longer. Why do you say that?" Replied the Master, "When you have one eye on the goal, you only have one eye on the path." (Zen, 144)

I often set out to "work harder," but I find that I only succeed in making myself more paranoid. I think about my final grade and not my assignments, I think about my ideal future, my life at it's peak, instead of being present in the day to day things that would take me there. Keeping my eye on the goal, I feel detached, an entirely different person from the man I'm envisioning, it keeps me from becoming him.

2. *"Carrying in the Mind*

Two traveling monks reached a river where they met a young woman. Wary of the current, she asked if they could carry her across. One of the monks hesitated, but the other quickly picked her up onto his shoulders, transported her across the water, and put her down on the other bank. She thanked him and departed. As the monks continued on their way, the one was brooding and preoccupied. Unable to hold his silence, he spoke out. "Brother, our spiritual training teaches us to avoid any contact with women, but you picked that one up on your shoulders and carried her!" "Brother," the second monk replied, "I set her down on the other side, while you are still carrying her." (Zen, 148)

These things about letting go of that which imprisons your mind are becoming increasingly personal to me. I tend to move on fairly easily, but my father's TBIs have changed him in a way that has made him obsessive about the wrongdoings of others, specifically my mom and brother. His continuing to "carry" these things is destroying parts of his life and distorting others. I get essay length messages from him vilifying my family members and repeating the same script of bitterness. The other day I sent him this parable in response. I often send him quotes from our readings, hoping he will

eventually set his anger down on the other bank. Almost every parable made me laugh, as did this one, and there are undeniable, universal truths mixed into the punchlines.

Siddhartha - Herman Hesse

1. *"It is written: "Your soul is the whole world." (Hesse, 7) "Why must he, the blameless one, wash away his sins and endeavor to cleanse himself anew each day?" (Hesse, 7)*

The change between Buddhism and the lack of Self, to Siddhartha's story (obviously driven by Buddhist influence, but Siddhartha was not a Buddhist), in which he explores the Self in detail, was refreshing to me. The first encounter of it confused me, as I began reading the book expecting it to be more of an image of Buddhism than I should have. Another thing that threw me was the acknowledgment of sin, as Walpola Rahula wrote that there was no sin in Buddhism.

2. *"Siddhartha has one single goal----to become empty, to become empty of thirst, desire, dreams, pleasure, and sorrow----to let the Self die." (Hesse, 7) "He lost his Self a thousand times and for days on end he dwelt in non-being." (Hesse, 15)*

There it is! The absence of Self. "Thirst" makes an appearance as well. My heart skipped a beat when I read "non-being" as Taoism came flooding back to me. I should read this book again, I'm sure there are things I didn't consider fully the first time through.

3. *"All this, colored and in a thousand different forms, had always been there. The sun and moon had always shone; the rivers had always flowed and the bees had hummed, but in previous times all this had been nothing to Siddhartha but a fleeting and illusive veil before his eyes, regarded with distrust, condemned to be disregarded and ostracized from the thoughts, because it was not reality, because reality lay on the other side of the visible." (Hesse, 45/46)*

I am again reminded of the myth of the cave, but in a different way. Siddhartha saw the natural pleasantries of life as the shadows on the cave wall, thinking he knew of a place beyond to which he could climb and find a heightened way of being, but he was casting his own shadow over reality and obscuring it.

4. *"Writing is good, thinking is better. Cleverness is good, patience is better."* (Hesse, 65)

A sentence that states some things I've only begun to see in the last four months, far better than I could in countless essays.

5. *"They both listened silently to the water, which to them was not just water, but the voice of life, the voice of Being, or perpetual Becoming."* (Hesse, 108)

I have seen these words capitalized before like this. It must seem like my favorite reference to make, but this reminded me of Schopenhauer's line, "...in the interdependence and relativity of all things; in continual Becoming without ever Being..." (107) Both of whom note Becoming as constant, the flux of change like the flow of the river, but Being is viewed differently. The river leads Siddhartha to see his entire life taken off of the linear track of time, he is able to comprehend his Being, whereas Schopenhauer sees things that have passed as non-existent, with the only state of existence being the "ever passing present moment." (107)

6. *"Many people have to change a great deal and wear all sorts of clothes. I am one of those, my friend."* (Hesse, 141)

If I'm correct in assessing myself, I am also one of those. I have legally changed my name once, and unofficially three times, if you were to hold a picture up of myself from ten years ago you would see no similarity, if you were to do the same with a picture from three years ago you would barely see me there. Because I have moved every two or three years of my life, I've learned to adapt and grow into the space, and

that process always changes me a great deal. What I hope I can do is become more like Siddhartha. While he becomes a new man, several times, to his friend Govinda, he has more or less chosen to change, at times guiding it with great meticulousness (and other times dropping the reins and letting the horse run free). He sought the change out, while I feel as if I am at the mercy of an indecisive sculptor who thinks he is funny.

7. "It seems to me, Govinda, that love is the most important thing in the world."

This line shows how insanely dynamic Siddhartha's character is. He began as the type of person too entrenched in their own pragmatic and supercilious natures to let themselves love, even admitting this about himself to Kamala, and goes on to see love as the most important thing in the world.