

Franz Kafka (1883-1924), *Parables and Paradoxes*, Schocken, 1961.

Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000), *Akhsav*, 1959, pp. 110-1

Robert M. Pirsig (b. 1928), *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, 1974, p. 220

(1) Richard Feynman (1918-1988), quoted in *Superstrings: A Theory of Everything*, ed. Davies and Brown, 1988.

(2) Richard Feynman, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, TV documentary, 1981

(3) On Richard Feynman's blackboard at the time of his death, quoted in *The Universe in a Nutshell*, Stephen Hawking, 2001.

G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), *The Philosophy of History*, 1837, p. 27

Virginia Woolf, *On Not Knowing Greek*

KAFKA. The Tower of Babel. If it had been possible to build the tower of Babel without ascending it, the work would have been permitted. **The Pit of Babel.** What are you building? • I want to dig a subterranean passage. Some progress must be made. My station up there is much too high. • We are digging the pit of Babel. **Couriers.** They were offered the choice between becoming kings or the couriers of kings. The way children would, they all wanted to be couriers. Therefore there are only couriers who hurry about the world, shouting to each other—since there are no kings—messages that have become meaningless. They would like to put an end to this miserable life of theirs but they dare not because of their oaths of service. **AMICHAÏ. Benjamin.** History is a eunuch, • It seeks to castrate mine as well, • To cut with paper • Sharper than any knife; to crush • And to stuff my mouth forever • With what it cut off • As with the mutilation of bodies of war, • So that I shouldn't sing, but make a barren chirp, • And learn many languages, • But not one of them mine, • So that I should be scattered and dispersed, • Not like the Tower of Babel • Reaching to heaven. **PIRSIG. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.** Zen is in the "spirit of the valley," not the mountaintop. The only Zen you find on the tops of mountains is the Zen you bring up there. **FEYNMAN. (1)** God was invented to explain mystery. God is always invented to explain those things that you do not understand. Now, when you finally discover how something works, you get some laws which you're taking away from God; you don't need him anymore. But you need him for the other mysteries. So therefore you leave him to create the universe because we haven't figured that out yet; you need him for understanding those things which you don't believe the laws will explain, such as consciousness, or why you only live to a certain length of time — life and death — stuff like that. God is always associated with those things that you do not understand. Therefore I don't think that the laws can be considered to be like God because they have been figured out. **(2)** My father had taught me, looking at a bird...he says, "Do you know what that bird is? It's a brown-throated thrush. But in Portuguese it's a _____, in Italian a _____, in Chinese it's a _____, in Japanese a _____." He says, "Now, know all the languages you want to know what the name of that bird is, and when you're finished with all that

you'll know absolutely nothing whatever about the bird. You only know about humans in different places and what they call the bird. Now," he says, "let's look AT the bird and what it's doing." **(3)** What I cannot create, I do not understand. **HEGEL.** The building of a house is, in the first instance, a subjective aim and design. On the other hand we have, as means, the several substances required for the work — Iron, Wood, Stones. The elements are made use of in working up this material: fire to melt the iron, wind to blow the fire, water to set wheels in motion, in order to cut the wood, etc. The result is, that the wind, which has helped to build the house, is shut out by the house; so also are the violence of rains and floods, and the destructive powers of fire, so far as the house is made fireproof. The stones and beams obey the law of gravity — press downward — and so high walls are carried up. Thus the elements are made use of in accordance with their nature, and yet to co-operate for a product, by which their operation is limited. Thus the passions of men are gratified; they develop themselves and their aims in accordance with their natural tendencies, and build up the edifice of human society; thus fortifying a position for Right and Order against themselves. **WOOLF. On Not Knowing Greek.** But again (the question comes back and back), Are we reading Greek as it was written when we say this? When we read these few words cut on a tombstone, a stanza in a chorus, the end or the opening of a dialogue of Plato's, a fragment of Sappho, when we bruise our minds upon some tremendous metaphor in the Agamemnon instead of stripping the branch of its flowers instantly as we do in reading Lear—are we not reading wrongly? losing our sharp sight in the haze of associations? reading into Greek poetry not what they have but what we lack? Does not the whole of Greece heap itself behind every line of its literature? They admit us to a vision of the earth unravaged, the sea unpolluted, the maturity, tried but unbroken, of mankind. Every word is reinforced by a vigour which pours out of olive-tree and temple and the bodies of the young...Chief among these sources of glamour and perhaps misunderstanding is the language. We can never hope to get the whole fling of a sentence in Greek as we do in English. We cannot hear it, now dissonant, now harmonious, tossing sound from line to line across a page. We cannot pick up infallibly one by one all those minute signals by which a phrase is made to hint, to turn, to live... • Further, in reckoning the doubts and difficulties there is this important problem: Where are we to laugh in reading Greek? ...To

laugh instantly it is almost necessary (though Aristophanes may supply us with an exception) to laugh in English. Humour, after all, is closely bound up with a sense of the body...The French, the Italians, the Americans, who derive physically from so different a stock, pause, as we pause in reading Homer, to make sure that they are laughing in the right place, and the pause is fatal. Thus humour is the first of the gifts to perish in a foreign tongue, and when we turn from Greek to English literature it seems, after a long silence, as if our great age were ushered in by a burst of laughter. **CALVINO. Invisible Cities.** Kublai asks Marco, "When you return to the West, will you repeat to your people the same tales you tell me?" • "I speak and speak," Marco says, "but the listener retains only the words he is expecting." **ARENDT. Eichmann in Jerusalem.** All correspondence referring to the matter was subject to rigid "language rules," and, except in the reports from the *Einsatzgruppen*, it is rare to find documents in which such bald words as "extermination," "liquidation," or "killing" occur. The prescribed code names for killing were "final solution," "evacuation" (*Aussiedlung*), and "special treatment" (*Sonderbehandlung*); deportation...received the names of "resettlement" (*Umsiedlung*) and "labor in the East" (*Arbeitseinsatz im Osten*), the point of these latter names being that Jews were indeed often temporarily resettled in ghettos and that a certain percentage of them were temporarily used for labor...Only among themselves could the "bearers of secrets" talk in uncoded language, and it is very unlikely that they did so in the ordinary pursuit of their murderous duties—certainly not in the presence of their stenographers and other office personnel. For whatever other reasons the language rules may have been devised, they proved of enormous help in the maintenance of order and sanity in the various widely diversified services whose cooperation was essential in this matter. Moreover, the very term "language rules" (*Sprachregelung*) was itself a code name; it meant what in ordinary language would be called a lie. **CAMUS. The Myth of Sisyphus.** The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor... • One sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it, and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyline space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward the lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain. • It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock... • All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is a thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up. Unconscious, secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his efforts will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is, but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which become his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling. • I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Italo Calvino (1925-1985), *Invisible Cities*, 1972.

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 1963.

Albert Camus (1913-1960), *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942.

Questions:

Kafka: What limits humankind?

Amichai: What is the connection between language and dispersion?

Pirsig: Does technology have an ultimate purpose?

Feynman (1): Does God require people to understand anything?

Feynman (2): What is the difference between a name and a thing?

Feynman (3): Is there a limit to what should be taught?

Hegel: How can his analogy be applied to our story?

Camus: Is it good for people to build towers?

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