



**INCITE  
ITEMS**

**For Educational Iconoclasm**

Tragic Perception:  
Meditation, Ethics,  
and the Human  
Condition

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The following essay concerns Finkel's time as a student in the Applied Meditation Studies program at the Won Institute of Graduate Studies in Glenside, Pennsylvania, just outside of Philadelphia. This essay is the basis of Finkel's final presentation for his degree.



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## I. This essay...

This essay is a summing up in five movements. It begins by resituating the recent closing of the Applied Meditation Studies (AMS) program into a larger context in an attempt to better understand the difficulty of offering a graduate program committed to a creative engagement, as opposed to a steward-like engagement, with the practice of meditation. This essay attempts to name the AMS curricular wager in effect which, in my opinion, revolved around widening the spectrum of assigned texts to include human thinking flaring forth from the soil of pessimism. David Benatar, in a book entitled *The Human Predicament*, defines optimism and pessimism in the following way. “Any view of the facts or any evaluation thereof that depicts some element of *the human condition* in positive terms I shall call an optimistic view. By contrast, I shall describe as pessimistic any view that depicts some element of *the human condition* in negative terms.” The common variable which shows up in both definitions is a reference to *the human condition*. The human condition is the *common* problem, predicament, or situation that both pessimists and optimists are attempting to evaluate. Encountering material which interprets the human condition in a predominantly pessimistic light was a first for me in higher education and I wonder if this is the case due to a larger educational phenomena in which naming the potential terror or horror of our shared human predicament is better left unnamed. I had been exposed to material engaging dark nights but most always a gesture of progress slipped in and the dark night was followed by a new and better day. A part of me is still very committed to the intimate connection between dark nights and the freshening of days, but I find it of great value to also let those whose perspective refuses the speculation about the new and better day a chance to share their view.

This essay is a testament to an unusual educational experience. This essay is a thank you to all of the students, faculty, and administration that I encountered. This essay is a eulogy to the usual fate of attempts to institutionalize a visionary vision. The aim is to not land blame,

locate a scapegoat or point fingers. Instead, the aim is to become ever more clearer about the paradoxes, contradictions, struggles, and seeming impossibilities of offering higher education degrees that revolve around potent contemplative practices delivered in a mood of *sincerity*. By sincerity I mean an openness to uncertainty. “Sincere,” from Latin “*sincerus*, of things, “unmixed.” Unmixed of what? Unmixed in the sense that questions and answers were not delivered in a mixture. Rather, timeless questions had the chance to be engaged with afresh, time-bound. This essay seeks to tease out a connection between *tragic perception*, an underlying theme of the AMS curriculum, and the potential moral ramifications of engaging in meditative practice through this gaze. This essay is an attempt to theorize a conception of a timeless good in and for our time. This essay is fraught with generalizations, oversimplifications, speculations and groundless claims. Yet, despite these flaws, I still hold out for the possibility that it may speak to one or two humans attempting to tarry with the elusiveness of that which is of ultimate concern.

My whole tendency and, I believe, the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, *absolutely hopeless*. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it. —Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics”

Please join me in this next absolutely hopeless attempt say something about the absolute good or ultimate value from an ordinary view, not a view from nowhere.

## II. AMS is *apolis*

The discontinuation of the Applied Meditation Studies (AMS) program is a symptom of a much larger cultural phenomenon—a societal tendency to turn our eyes away from tragedy in tandem with the tendency for educational institutions to evade and resist pessimistic theories of the human condition. In this essay, I will offer the perspective that our cultures incapacity to harbor educational spaces for humans who live into (to live into) a *tragic perception* of the human’s ontological lot is the site of desperately needed further discussion in contemporary debates on moral self cultivation. There is a shortage of educational spaces which allow for the full gamut of human thought to be expressed. My intimation is this: there is a subtle yet profound relation between tragic perception, a pessimistic view of the enduring predicament of the human organism, and activity in accordance with that which is humble and just. In my estimation, the relationship in question between tragic perception, pessimism and morality is occluded due to a cultural milieu in which happiness is the prime addiction, pleasure is the prime motive and efficiency is the prime mover.

What I am naming as tragic perception is a term to capture what I saw as an underlying motif of the AMS experience and the AMS approach to meditation. One facet of tragic perception is that *no ultimate cures for the pains of existence are recommended*. In the words of Joshua Foa Dienstag, within the tragic mode of engaging existence, “there are no cures offered but only a public recognition of their (i.e., the pains of existence) depth and power.” I like this idea of creating spaces where humans can make their plights public. This can be very therapeutic and reduce the shame we may feel for our seeming imperfections. Through the gaze of tragic perception, *human pain is durative despite its complex and multitudinous mutations*. Countless discussions in our AMS education engaged the idea of a *curative fantasy*. Walter Stone states that: “The concept of a curative fantasy includes a patient’s conscious and unconscious hopes and expectations of what is necessary for their relief of suffering.” The AMS curriculum was

committed to placing the proposition that human suffering can achieve cessation in suspension and sought to engage Buddhist and non-Buddhist material from this starting point (in other words, calling into question the possibility that a curative fantasy can be realized). New fields of possibilities emerge when already given answers are bracketed. Bracketing dogmatic answers tills the psychic soil for questions of a different kind to emerge. In Gille Deleuze's description of Henri Bergson's intuitive method, he states that the first rule is to: "apply the test of true and false to problems themselves. Condemn false problems and reconcile truth and creation at the level of problems." Might the problem of ceasing human suffering be an example of a false problem? Refusing the way problems are automatically presented and reconciling fresh ways of engaging timeless yet timely dilemmas is more than an intellectual exercise. It is the pinnacle of *applying the meditative act* to everyday life. To meditate is to call the totality of self and world into question. To pose a sincere question, one's attachment to any certain answer must be revoked. Including the answer that human suffering will cease due to this practice, this knowledge, or this way of life. In a recent The Quietus interview, Eugene Thacker was asked the following question in relation to his recent release of *Infinite Resignation*:

At one point in the book you ask "how can everything be so loud and yet so insignificant?" which seems a very apposite predicament for our times. If all life is futile and suffering, and if we have an awareness of this, how is one to live in the world, how can we get to a place of quiet significance?

Thacker's response provides a valuable re-evaluation of the common notion that an unanswered question is a problem, and speaks to the lush spirit of the practice of asking sincere questions.

If I had the answer to that I wouldn't be a writer, I'd be a guru instead! I don't think there's really an answer, but I do think there's something in these

writings about being okay with the space of uncertainty, bewilderment, and confusion. Our kneejerk response is to think in terms of problems and solutions, questions and answers, and the culture we live in reinforces that. *Maybe the practice of going back and realising that there are questions that don't have answers—and that in itself is not a problem—is a good one.*

We can see the economic predicament that emerges for a program within a higher educational setting willing to offer a space to sincerely ask a question. To pose a genuine question, one must refrain from posing its attendant answer. A curriculum committed to this mode of education would contradict itself if a guarantee is latent (ie. a guarantee to limit stress, to minimize pain, to awaken, etc.) The skilled consumer is hesitant to make an investment in anything in which a guarantee is absent. Meditation and contemplation from the spirit of asking a sincere question leaves open to fate exactly what the student will gain from the pedagogic experience. But this element of the unknown is important when it comes to contemplative exercise because it is this ingredient which allows for the exercise to harbor initiatory potency to facilitate a genuine transformation in perception. With the increasing vocationalization of higher education in the name of practicality, the activity of education is often captured by the logic of profit, not by the logic of existential renewal. But when the transformational potential of an education environment is on the line, a serious choice is encountered, *ask sincere questions or barter guarantees*, guarantees that often have the quality of being perpetually deferred. To invite students to live into questions, while refraining from offering the questions' complementary answers, is to create an educational space allowing for the possibility that something other than the societal status quo will emerge. There are so many ways to name the problem with *things as they are*. I'll use the language from a document released by the Parliament of World's Religions in 1993 entitled *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*. Although written 25 years ago, I would say the words still seem accurate.

The world is in agony. The agony is so pervasive and urgent that we are compelled to name its manifestations so that the depth of this pain may be made clear. Peace eludes us—the planet is being destroyed—neighbors live in fear—women and men are estranged from each other—children die! This is abhorrent. We condemn the abuses of Earth’s ecosystems. We condemn the poverty that stifles life’s potential; the hunger that weakens the human body, the economic disparities that threaten so many families with ruin. We condemn the social disarray of the nations; the disregard for justice which pushes citizens to the margin; the anarchy overtaking our communities; and the insane death of children from violence. In particular we condemn aggression and hatred in the name of religion.

The AMS educational experience began from the standpoint that *the world is in agony*, and that no one has the absolute answers to the aforementioned conundrums. This kind of pedagogical event challenges the primal human instinct for security (i.e., to fit neatly into this agonizing world’s unjust and unsustainable flows). This is where the element of radicality that the AMS curriculum embodied comes into play. Radical visions often speak from the space after the addiction to survival is quelled. Radical imaginings speak to possibilities that seem utopian at present but only seem this way because of the vision’s dissonance with the current state of affairs. This dissonance is the terrain of hope. and failing to follow these visions through may be considered a malfunction of faith in the field of the possible.

Concerning the quandary of *application* and the question of what it may mean for a contemplative practice to be applied to this, local, everyday life, AMS confronted the student in a rigorous, vigorous, and true buddhistic fashion. Naming the spirit of the intellectual that I encountered in the faculty, François Zourabichvili writes, “The intellectual ceases to function as a guide or a conscience: she proposes

nothing, and is ahead of no one. Her capacities and attention are directed toward the involuntary, or the emergence of new fields of the possible.” (François Zourabichvili, *Deleuze and the Possible: on Involuntarism in Politics*) The teachers offered their expertise and then stepped aside for the students to come to a resolution themselves. This method allows for a dynamism in the educational setting and carries within itself a certain *respect* for the contingent events that fashioned the individual student in the past and challenge them in the present. The infamous words in the *Buddha’s Farewell* speak to this kind of intellectual setting:

Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Seek salvation alone in the truth. Look not for assistance to anyone besides yourselves...Those who, either now or after I am dead, shall be lamps unto themselves, relying upon themselves only and not relying upon any external help, but holding fast to the truth as their lamp, and seeking their salvation in the truth alone, and shall not look for assistance to any one besides themselves, it is they, Ananda, among my bhikkhus, who shall reach the very topmost height! But they must be anxious to learn.  
—Paul Carus, *The Gospel of Buddha*

The key phrase here is the final sentence spoken in the tone of a prophetic command: *but they must be anxious to learn*. Anxiety breeds necessity, and, channeled properly, becomes a limitless fount of curiosity. In the AMS program, we learned to not wage war against anxiety but instead to try to come to a creative relationship with this potential force of novelty and this potential motivator to realize new possibilities. On the topic of anxiety, sadness, and American culture, Eric Wilson, in a text entitled *Against Happiness* writes:

What is behind this desire to purge sadness from our lives, especially in America, the land of splendid dreams and wild success? Why are most Americans so utterly willing to have

an essential part of their hearts discarded like so much waste? What are we to make of this American obsession with happiness, an obsession that could well lead to a sudden extinction of the creative impulse, that could result in an extermination as horrible as those foreshadowed by global warming and environmental crisis and nuclear proliferation? What drives this rage for complacency, for the innocuous smile? What fosters this desperate contentment?

A central question here is whether the American obsession with a banal happiness (if Wilson's diagnosis is accurate), an attempt to access a steady state of happiness purged of sadness, is repelling certain experiences or insights which may lead to a different kind of person and in turn a different kind of society. Perhaps a different society that is not diagnosed by the Parliament of the World's Religions as *in agony*? As practitioners attempting to follow the Buddha's advice to become a lamp unto oneself, we may encounter an anxiety in daring to live from this terrain of tragic in-betweenness. George Steiner, in an essay entitled *Tragedy Reconsidered*, names this tragic in-betweenness in terms of a sense of "ontological homelessness." Leaving the comfort of clichés, conditioned responses, pre-formulated answers, and familiar beliefs may usher one into the sense of finding no stable ground beneath. "The sickness of clichés leaves us in an agonizing in-between: we no longer believe in another world, but nor do we yet believe in this world..." (François Zourabichvili's, *Deleuze and the Possible: on Involuntarism in Politics*) This is a real predicament that the AMS curriculum attempted to creatively engage. In my opinion, part of the tragedy of our current educational situation, especially for those committed to an educational environment aiming towards sincere inward transformation, is that there are not many spaces committed to tolerating the unbearable of coming to see the world more clearly and in that seeing losing a sense of hope. AMS provided a room for such an outlet, for this unbearable to not be shunned, repressed,

suppressed, doubted or told otherwise. The AMS curriculum was laced with honesty, realism, and a strange aspiration-without-expectation.

The existential anxiety that contemplative practice may bring about may not be due to a faulty approach but to a clarity into the tragic predicament of the human organism who dares to understand the objective and subjective dimensions of their plights. AMS is *apolis*, Greek for *unhoused*, and bearing the unsupportable fate of the tragic subject. Human hearts in a state of confusion laced with curiosity due to a clarity into the human predicament will have one less room to come to terms with their sense of alienation. But the offering in this essay is that there is more than a psychotherapeutic dimension of minimizing alienation and sadness on the line. I suspect a relationship between coming to see the human predicament as tragic and a moral disposition. Collaboratively working through challenging phases can be a gauntlet for deep realizations of care; and we need communal education spaces to make this transition. Meditation heightens one's capacity to be affected, and along with this comes the capacity to feel the *intolerable* more clearly as well as the moments of joy. Yes, we need to feel both, *the intolerable and the joy*. There is a special relationship between intolerability and possibility. In other words, a crucial relationship between tragic perception, the capacity and willingness to direct one's attention toward that which is intolerable in one's current predicament, and living into a caring response. Building off this connection, I would like to introduce a distinction between two basic kinds of intolerability: objective and subjective.

### **III. Two Worlds, Two Sufferings, Two Cures**

Let's unpack further this concept of tragic perception and the ethical possibilities for a human being who trains to see the world in this light. This notion that ethics is a training regimen makes it clear that choice is present throughout the entire process as we can choose to train our perception to see different aspects of the world. In my opinion, it is in accordance with the good to attempt to understand

what we are training our perception to pick up and what we are training our perception to leave out. If we turn our focus onto the human situation, we will inevitably encounter the first noble truth of *dukkha*. In the glossary of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's *Mindfulness With Breathing*, he defines *dukkha* in the following way:

Stress, suffering, misery, unsatisfactoriness, pain: literally, “hard to endure, *difficult to bear*.”...*dukkha* is the quality of experience that results when the mind is conditioned by *avijja* into craving, attachment, egoism, and selfishness. This feeling takes on forms such as disappointment, dissatisfaction, frustration, agitation, anguish, dis-ease, despair...*In its universal sense, dukkha is the inherent condition of unsatisfactoriness, ugliness, and misery in all impermanent, conditioned things.* This second fundamental characteristic is the result of *anicca*: impermanent things cannot satisfy our wants and desires no matter how hard we try (and cry). The inherent decay and dissolution of things is misery.

I read the first noble truth as an ontological claim about the very structure of human existence itself. Ontological in the sense of a feature of human life that is independent of the specific social, political, economic world that is contingent to each individual. The term ontological is derived from the Greek term *ontos* which translates to “being” or “that which is.” In essence, an ontological claim wrestles with that which is universal, timeless, unaffected by subjective conditions. In resonant spirit to the first noble truth of *dukkha*, thinkers in the tradition of pessimism put on display resonant themes about the fundamental truths of suffering. In an essay entitled “Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche,” Joshua Foa Dienstag writes that a pessimistic vision of the world includes “the consistent finding...that the world is fundamentally disordered, untamable, unfair, and destructive.” The ethical injunction in this paper, which is very much an ongoing practice that I believe meditation can enhance, is the following: *To be ethical is to seek to know the ontological*

*predicament of the human condition and to choose to partake in practices that bring one's heart closer and one's mind in attunement with this objective structure of human life.*

To arrive at a notion of the objective good in our time, it is helpful to first admit that there are two worlds that are simultaneously present, co-emergent, different, yet ultimately inseparable. The human body is the site of the collision of these two worlds. World one is what I will refer to as the Social-Political-Economic (S-P-E) world. S-P-E is wholly contingent to time, place, and individual. Thinking in terms of the S-P-E world we each inhabit makes it possible to formulate a localized conception of ethical action but impossible to name any generic conception of what a universal good may mean to all humans, of all times, in all places. There have been numerous failed and oppressive attempts to try to generate a universal ethic from the S-P-E dimension of existence. An example of this would be the way in which prophets of capitalism spread their economic/political gospel through negotiation and brutal force believing that the formation of privatized ownership of industry and trade is the structure that should be spread across planet earth, universally, *ad infinitum*. Ethical action in the S-P-E terrain manifests itself as social justice movements geared toward specific causes, political movements geared toward particular communities, and other societal impulses seeking to minimize suffering and brutality via social, political, or economic reorganization. The second world that each human inhabits is what I will call the Ontological (ONT) world. This world alludes to the generic situation which confronts the human animal, in all times, in all places. To set the tone for what I have in mind, I will quote Jean Paul Sartre at length. This passage is from an essay entitled *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

Furthermore, although it is impossible to find in each and every man a universal essence that can be called human nature, *there is nevertheless a human universality of condition...* But what never vary are the necessities of being in the world, of having to labor and to die there. These

limitations are neither subjective nor objective, or rather there is both a subjective and an objective aspect of them. Objective, because we meet with them everywhere and they are everywhere recognisable: and subjective because they are lived and are nothing if man does not live them—if, that is to say, he does not freely determine himself and his existence in relation to them. And, diverse though man's purpose may be, at least none of them is wholly foreign to me, since every human purpose presents itself as an attempt either to surpass these limitations, or to widen them, or else to deny or to accommodate oneself to them. Consequently every purpose, however individual it may be, is of universal value.

Admitting the universality of the ONT world is not a claim about a human essence or a human nature but a claim that on the level of ontology, humans encounter *a shared situation* which some may call *the human condition*. The first noble truth of *dukkha* mentioned earlier captures this shared predicament very nicely. To reiterate Buddhadasa Bhikkhu on *dukkha*: *In its universal sense, dukkha is the inherent condition of unsatisfactoriness, ugliness, and misery in all impermanent, conditioned things.*

The gnawing sense of existential alienation is an example of a version of suffering that issues forth from being part of the ONT world and it is meditative practice which can address this kind of angst through some sort of identity transmutation. In the Buddhist path, this identity transmutation may come about through a realization of *anatta*. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu defines *anatta* as:

Not-self, selflessness, non-selfhood: the fact that all things without exception...are not-self and lack any essence or substance that could properly be called a “self.” This truth does not deny the existence of “things” but denies that they can be owned or controlled or be an owner or controller in

any but a relative, conventional sense...anatta is more or less a synonym of sunnata.

What I want to stay clear from is what I see as a common tendency for many socially engaged spiritual practitioners to fall prey to, namely to *conflate* these two worlds. Or better yet, to conflate the two kinds of ethics that emerge from these two different but overlapping worlds. S-P-E and ONT each have *different ways of naming suffering and different methods for its cessation*. There is a human condition that is inescapable, ever-present, imperturbable, universal, and objective. There is no *human nature* but there is a shared *human condition*. That which we refer to as human nature is actually the most common responses to this fundamental human condition. Spiritual systems and religious regimes often speak to an inherent quality or capacity in human beings that lies latent, ready to be re-awakened. This essay, influenced by the AMS experience, aims to transition meditative discourse and contemplative inquiry to *a realization of common conditions, as opposed to an awakening to common essences*. This shift is similar to what Sartre is exploring in the quote above. The universal is located not in the essence of a thing but in the common existential structures that precedes, informs, and outlives a very thing's coming into existence.

If the existential features of human life are common to all, then herein lies the possibility of a universal ethic grounded in something other than a universal human nature. This transition, from universal nature or universal essence to universal structures of existence, makes peace between the religious and the non-believers, and it is, in my estimation, meditative inquiry that provides a strong foundation for this kind of investigation into the human condition. To reiterate: We humans reside in two worlds, we meditation practitioners sit in two worlds, radically separate yet both ever-present. These two worlds, governed by radically different logics and values, create a situation that makes the human condition appear contradictory to the core. *Each world has its own understanding of what suffering is and what the cures of suffering are*. This is a tragic scenario because the cures

are often both true yet incompatible with the ONT and S-P-E methods of ceasing suffering often in tension. My hunch here is that a porous dualism can help us understand the *underlying unity* woven between *homo sapiens*. Affirming the idea that humans *inhabit two different worlds at once* may help us understand the background for countless misunderstandings between those who attempt the change the world from within-out and those who attempt to transform the world from without-in.

The two worlds are separate and interact in unequal ways. The S-P-E world has zero bearing on the ONT world and the fundamental human condition that presents and represents itself. No S-P-E revolution can ever have any effect on our ONT predicament. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his discussion of the Dionysian man in *The Birth of Tragedy*, captures the ONT situation for a human who sees clearly into the human condition. Nietzsche writes:

The Dionysian man bears a similarity to Hamlet: both have had a real glimpse into the essence of things. They have *understood*, and it disgusts them to act, for their action can change nothing in the eternal nature of things. They find it ridiculous or humiliating that they might be expected to order again a world which is out of joint. Knowledge kills action, for action requires our being covered with the veil of illusion—that is what Hamlet has to teach...Now any consolation no longer has an effect. His longing goes out over a world, even beyond the gods themselves, towards death. Existence, along with its blazing reflection in the gods or in an immortal afterlife, is denied. In the consciousness of once having glimpsed the truth, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of being...

The idea here is that there is feature of human life—an underlying structure to our experience—which is at once active and impossible to act against. Suffering in the ONT world pertains to a nameless, objectless, causeless suffering. Contemplative theory and practice offer

ways of working with this deep sense of estrangement or phobia of finitude with the possible elimination of the so called “I” that hangs in the balance between experience and world. The danger, which the AMS program was committed to keep a close eye on, is the way in which the ONT world and its version of suffering, and in turn its version of cure, can be conflated with the kinds of suffering and necessary cures needed in the reality of S-P-E. Conflating these two worlds causes one world to claim supremacy and envelope the other world. In effect, social justice advocates can easily relegate ONT suffering as wholly a byproduct of socio-economic-political conditions and vice versa—the sage of the ONT realm can mistakenly posit a spiritual cure for material ills. In a recent *Fresh Air* interview with Terry Gross, religious scholar Elaine Pagels spoke honestly and movingly about her experience of receiving the news that her young child was diagnosed with a terminal illness. In her juxtaposition of helplessness and guilt, she brings flesh to the horror and absurdity mentioned by Nietzsche above. She states:

And yet there was nothing we could do. That sense of helplessness was almost intolerable. And I realized that I felt guilty about it. And yet at a certain critical point in my son’s treatment, I realized that the guilt was only masking something much deeper and much more painful than guilt. And what it was masking was the fact that we were helpless, that there was nothing we could do. We had no input. As long as I felt guilty, I felt, well, at least it’s my fault or I have some agency in something that matters more to me than my own life. But if I have no agency, I mean, that’s almost intolerable. And I realized that I’d rather feel guilty than helpless. It’s a choice I made unconsciously. And I think many people do, because the feeling that we can’t do anything and we have no input is more than we can *bear*.

## IV. The Vision of Pessimism

Humankind cannot bear very much reality.  
—T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” *Four Quartets*

To enter a pessimistic vision of the world, core beliefs that function as mental methods of mitigating pain, sadness, and alienation must be called into question and effectively placed in suspension. The activity of placing cherished ideas and unfounded ideals in suspension has a long history. One strand of this history leads back to Edmund Husserl and the phenomenological movement in western philosophy. To reclaim contact with things in themselves, the phenomenologist entered the *epoché*, a mode of engagement characterized by non-judgmentalism and an absence of assumptions. The “phenomenological reduction,” or the process of entering into the *epoché*, resembles the practice of certain forms of meditation, primarily in intention. The common aim of both of these practices is to usher the practitioner into a novel view of the world and to interrupt habits of thinking that can close off the individual to gaining new perspectives. Let’s revisit this idea of tragic perception and its relationship to meditative inquiry. To enter a worldview in which that which one views is *fundamentally disordered* requires *all notions of cosmic order (i.e., rta, will of god, tao, the natural way, etc.) to be placed in suspension*. This process is not about neglecting or dismissing but transmuting a body of thought and recognizing the multifaceted applications a given body of knowledge may have on the worlds we inhabit. The aim is not to deny the possible validity of a cosmic order: the aim is *application*. Sincere application, especially application to the S-P-E terrain, may require a suspension of all transcendent causal schema to provide a fresh glimpse into the immanent causal network at play. Hence, to *apply meditation*, one must be willing to engage the social-political-economic dynamic within which the performance of *just sitting* is occurring. Admitting that the world is *fundamentally untamable* opens up the possibility of investigating the nature of the inner controller who truly believes it can manage the chaos. Furthermore, there is the consistent finding of

the pessimist: the presence of a *fundamental destructiveness*. To acknowledge this hard fact, the bright-sided tendency to resituate destruction within a larger narrative of redemptive suffering must be placed in suspension. Destruction, death, dissonance must be engaged with not as a mere means to some better state of existence. In this vein of thinking, there is no inevitable new synthesis nor an upward progressive movement nor historical unfolding towards a drastically better situation.

In the AMS classroom, we were encouraged to place “compensating” beliefs that placate pain and anxiety into suspension. There was not a dismissal of the third and fourth noble truths but a deep feeling that the first is the noble truth *par excellence* and the one that comes closest to a universal claim. *I’d wager that more humans can relate to a sense of dis-ease as opposed to a sense of liberation*. A transition in my thinking on ethics occurred due to the AMS program. Prior to AMS, I believed that moral cultivation and respect for difference was elicited through an ever-deepening taste of the wonder *of being* a part of the fundamental mystery *of being* and *of being* a unique and irreplaceable part of planet earth. Post-AMS, my thinking has shifted. It now seems that an undiluted and undeluded encounter with the tragic, as opposed to the sacred, is a much more cautious way to introduce a human to *oneness*. Not a oneness through a non-dual apprehension of one’s affinity with cosmic mystery, but a oneness in the sense of an earthly comradeship through an encounter with what Thomas Ligotti names the “brotherhood of suffering between everything alive.” Or in the words of George Steiner, there is “an irremediable rupture between Being and Existence.” Our chance for something of a universal ethical practice will have to situate itself *vis-à-vis*—face to face with—this ontological gap referenced by Steiner. Furthermore, it is the ongoing attempt to further one’s understanding about this metaphysical breach that is, in my opinion, a universal, trans-cultural, trans-historical ethical activity. Meditation, when applied properly and performed with the right motive, serves as an intensifying instrument to better understand this fundamental rupture that is the cornerstone feature of the human condition. *There is no universal human essence*,

*but there is a universal human condition and it is a universal ethical practice to attempt to know and discover this.* We should transition from know thy-self to know thy-condition.

Admitting axiomatically that each human inhabits two worlds at once, we may come to better understand the one world we all share. Inhabiting this *one world*, we may come to an understanding of *oneness* that expresses itself as the deep insight into “the brotherhood of suffering between everything alive.” Note the difference between the fellowship of suffering versus the fellowship of joy and how the former sounds like much less of a violent claim. Telling someone they should be joyful when they are not is a lot less violent than reminding the joyous of the inevitable which is to come. In Nietzsche’s lexicon, the mystery doctrine of tragedy initiates an individual into “the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent.” In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes:

This view of things already provides us with all the elements of a profound and pessimistic view of the world, together with the mystery doctrine of tragedy: the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primary cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness.

This oneness, this brotherhood of suffering between all and all, can be known through meditation, self inquiry, and contemplation of our shared condition. In contrast to the S-P-E realm, which is divided into few winners and many losers, the ONT predicament flattens the S-P-E pushes and pulls and sets the stage for something like a legitimate realization of an equality that includes all. If there is a cultural phobia against a pessimistic outlook at work in our culture (see, for instance, Thomas Ligotti’s *The Conspiracy Against The Human Race*), then this phobia may be preventing humans from living into a tragic perception of the human predicament and in turn stultifying an awakening to

oneness through a revival of the recognition of our *common condition* for which a *shared sense of responsibility* can come forth.

## V. For No Reason

*Our situation is out-of-joint with the universe to begin with. We cannot hope to set it right—we can only await the release from this predicament provided by death. In the meantime, we merely manage our condition—such management is, to Schopenhauer, the purpose of philosophy; for Freud, it is psychotherapy that serves this end. But the aim, in both cases, is not to create happiness or virtue but to minimize unhappiness by bringing us to greater knowledge of the gap between time-bound consciousness and the timeless reality consciousness defies. —Joshua Foa Dienstag, Pessimism*

Tragic perception nullifies our addiction to *fix it*—be it ourselves or the other—and ushers the practitioner into a terrain of ambiguity and uncertainty. This is all part of that tragic scenario, the presence of a love and a willingness to act in tandem with a sense that meaningful action is impossible. My intimation is that this recognition of ambiguity and groundlessness is fertile soil from which an ethical earthling may spawn. Ontologically homeless yet sweating profusely with a sense of care, *for no reason*, yes, that is the key. As soon as there is a reason for our willingness to care we have lost touch with motivation coming from *unconditional* care and subsumed ethics into the space of a business negotiation. *For no reason* is a synonym for the unconditional. It opens up the proper posture to take present action for a future of which will not return any favors or provide any rewards. Building on this connection between the ethical potential of recognizing a fundamental sense of *not at homeness* that is structurally present in the human condition, Susan Neiman, in *Evil in Modern Thought*, writes the following: “What remains is the moral imperative not to deceive ourselves about the magnitude of the modern catastrophe. Decency demands that we *refuse to feel at home*

in any particular structure the world provides to domesticate us. It also requires that we *refuse to feel at home* in our own skins.”

So what becomes of the meditation hall in this light? The hall is valuable and the practice of meditation is valuable. The practice may become an ongoing activity where human’s collaboratively testify and bear witness to the ontological situation of *homo sapiens*. The hall is the place where humans pay homage to the interminable rupture between “Being and Existence.” And through this testament, a human may come to feel deeper into the tragic oneness in which what we all share is that we are split. Ruptured in infinite variations but ruptured all the same trying our best to endure the burdens of time and the foreknowledge that all we love and cherish will pass away. Tragic perception, pessimism, this is a training to maintain fidelity to the first noble truth. Bringing the spirit of tragic perception to the practice of meditation is exactly what the AMS experiment was all about for me. Despite glimpses of cessation, always remember *dukkha*.

In conclusion, this phrase *for no reason* really speaks to me. To quote Joshua Foa Dienstag one last time from an essay of his in a compilation entitled *Rethinking Tragedy*. He writes, “If we can understand why an artist like Dostoyevsky, who knows that art is devoid of metaphysical value, would still want to write, then we can understand why Nietzsche thinks pessimism can result in a creative pathos.” What I get from Dienstag’s statement is that an activity is set free when any attribution of metaphysical value is eliminated. Might the meditative practice remain in chains as long as we are *doing* it for a certain reason or to *get* a certain result? When an activity is redefined as a means instead of an end, its unconditional potentiality, its *for no reason* power, is co-opted and its truly revolutionary potential to disrupt, interrupt, and create new beginnings is lost. In effect, meditation becomes a *labor* or a *work* as opposed to an *action* which harbors the potency of nascency akin to the newbomness of a child, wholly unpredictable.