



MY STUDY OF A DISMAL SCIENTIST

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In *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, Douglas Adams suggested that the worst possible torture that a person could experience would be to understand his relationship to the universe. Adams made sense because there are far better things you can do than understand your relationship to the entire universe. For example, you can try to understand your own relationship to the economic and political system. So, I decided that I would study economics, and not study philosophy.

This was a time when I wondered if I would ever be able to make a living, because of my failure to get a job when I graduated from high school. I understood that in capitalist society you trade skills for money and money for food, and so on, but I thought it would help if I really understood how it works. These were further reasons to study economics. Two of the classes that I took were used to satisfy philosophy and social science requirements, and two were simply for self-improvement. Economics was of great interest to me. The reason that I did not major in economics was that I thought it was so easy that no one would ever pay me to do it.

Often, I wanted to enjoy life and forget my economic situation. I had dreams of designing spacecraft, and inventing new ways for the spacecraft to study other planets. I also had dreams about having time to engage in activities like poetry and painting. Wealth was hard to imagine. To imagine wealth

is to remember your own poverty. I was at a top rated university where people expected affluent futures, and these expectations affected the way that the other students heard information about economics. I filtered the information with the fear that I might have no future. If I enjoyed learning about how people are, then at least the present was a good thing. The future was uncertain.

In my first economics class, I did not study for tests because I was struggling in many other classes like English and Latin. Getting a B in economics without studying seemed like a better option than failing English and earning an A in economics. I did however absorb many of the basic worldviews of economists in lectures, and these are useful concepts.

One important concept was that economics is a positive science, concerned with things that can be measured (in principle), and not things that are impossible to measure. For example you cannot measure what should be or what should not be because that depends on your moral values, and you cannot determine if person A is happier than person B because whatever gauge you have of happiness cannot compare two people.

Another important concept was the energy wasted regulating people. For example if government thought everybody should stand on their heads for two hours a day, it could pass a law requiring this. But, if most people did not want to do this head standing, then the government would be able to force people to do what it thought they should do by hiring a lot of police officers, at enormous expense. The government can save much expense by only regulating peoples actions when the actions affect other people.

My introduction to economics teacher was openly a conservative when it came to issues like corporate regulation (which he was against) and taxes (which he thought should be lowered). He did argue in favor of abortion rights on the grounds that in third world countries it would be hard to educate women about birth control and “harder to tell them not to do things in the bedroom.” I was familiar with the combined right wing pro-abortion ideology from my high school teacher

Mr. Wilson. I was less familiar with my economics teacher's response to the question of whether he was anti-religion. He said that he was all for religion because it kept people of low intellect off the street. "You are at a top university," he told the whole class. "You're sort of the cream of the crop, but think about your friend who dropped out of high school. Do you think you can tell him, 'read John Locke: that will straighten you out.?' " He seemed to think that religion was an opiate of the masses, and he seemed happy that the general public was on drugs. I disagreed with this because I did not believe that the broader public was inferior. I thought that impressions of the general public lacking the intellect of people in universities might be more an impression than reality.

The instructor told us that differences between brands of products were more impression than reality. That is to say, we were taught that supposed differences in quality were so difficult to pin down that the difference may not really exist, as compared to differences in prices, which are well defined. I doubted that differences in intellect were well defined either.

In economics, we were told how to understand a number of issues. For example, we were told how to grasp why family farms are declining. My instructor noted, "every state has a university like NC State that does research to improve the productivity of farms. As farms become more productive, the number of farms that you need declines." He was confronted by students who came from farms and he had this to say, "I'm from Detroit and for those people the auto assembly lines are way of life. Are you saying that for one group: you get special treatment because you have a way of life? Would you then say to the other group: move over and make way for progress?" The simple explanation for the crisis in the family farm made a lot of sense to me because the increase in productivity could be directly observed.

Of course, the government has taken steps to preserve the way of life enjoyed by Michiganders. Chrysler did receive a loan from the government in the late 1970s. More recently, both Chrysler and General Motors received loans from the

government when they faced another economic crisis. No outright subsidies were given to auto companies in the way that they have been given to agriculture. So, as with most very quotable blanket statements, the reality is subtler than that instructor's quotable statement. I believe that I absorbed the statement as if it were a "fact."

My instructor also offered insights into the businessman's state of mind. "Businessmen don't like to take risks," he said. "They are tired and stressed and ready to laugh at anything. Say, 'Thank God, we don't get all the government we pay for—five hundred dollar hammers.' It will bring the house down." He was aware that the class found this comment only mildly amusing. It had recently been discovered that the Pentagon had tried to send extra money to contractors by giving them very high prices for items like hammers and paper clips.

Finally, we learned what economists mean by rational. Economists say everyone is rational. What they mean is that everyone makes decisions where they consider different options, and make decisions and this is reasoning to a conclusion. This made everyone's decisions valuable and explained why what everyone thought was important. Since I no longer considered myself very important, this made a lot of sense. The children who teased me had made some kind of decision that they wanted everyone to be like them, and it was valuable in some sense.

This was the econ class that I took to fulfill half of my requirement to learn social sciences. The other half of the requirement was fulfilled using linguistics. The course that took the place of philosophy was called "History of Economic Thought" and my teacher was David McFarland.

McFarland was an expert on the Cola industry, and a good part of his career had been spent documenting the collaboration between the major corporations that control the industry (in violation of anti-trust laws). He explained to us the amount of money that the industry had for advertising hurt other companies trying to undercut their prices, and led to a situation where they could charge much more than the prod-

uct cost them to make. “You get what you pay for, if that ain’t the biggest lie ever told,” McFarland said. Because of his expertise on the industry, he had appeared as an expert on the news show 60 Minutes.

McFarland agreed with my introduction to economics teacher that businessmen do not like risk, and he related this to the idea that businessmen like to compete. He said that they do not like to compete. “They may want other people to compete, because they can get a better price on something, but when it comes to them it’s: No, we don’t like competition. It will get too cutthroat.” The irony was that competition is the only thing that gets us better things in a capitalist economy, but businessmen always try to find a way to avoid competing.

The concept of positive science was important in the history of economics class because it was not always there. “People like Thomas Aquinas discussed economic issues, but they used this word a lot.” He wrote “Should” on the board.

I pointed out that Latin has no word for should, but the subjunctive voice is translated as should. I was missing the point. He was trying to explain how the words “should” and “ought” imply moral judgment, and moral judgment is different from description. Adam Smith had at one point in his career written a “Theory of Moral Sentiments.” And this book on morals had said that people ought to put themselves in the place of another person when making decisions. In “A Critical Inquiry Into the Wealth of Nations”, Smith described how people acting in their own interests were fueling the industrial revolution in England. “The Wealth of Nations” was the beginning of economics in the modern sense.

McFarland explained in detail the concept of the invisible hand. Smith saw people acting individually to further their own interests as creating something very good for the entire economy. The reality that government regulation intended to impose moral values on people was costly was explained just as it had been explained in basic economics, although McFarland thought good could come from regulations intended to prevent corporations from abusing power.

We also learned why economics was called a dismal science, and it is not because people think economics is boring. An economist in the early 1800's named Thomas Malthus, had thought that the future of the industrial world was very bad. He thought that while man's ability to grow food was increasing, the population was growing much faster. In high school biology, I had heard Mr. Wilson claim that this theory was absolutely true; but the prediction was made long ago and shows no sign of coming true. The increases in food productivity associated with the study of agriculture in universities have so far outpaced the consumption of food, thus implying that the dismal predictions of economists in the past were premature guesswork. One reason that Mr. Wilson was so intrigued by this theory of economics was that Darwin had been intrigued by it. Darwin saw population pressure in lower animals as the kind of event that contributed to evolution.

Since this was a history of economics class, we studied more things than just capitalism. We studied Marxism and we studied the works of an economist named Thorstein Veblen. Marx is better known than Veblen, but it was Veblen who fascinated me. He described people as having more complex motives than was obvious such as wanting to appear richer than others; he coined the term "conspicuous consumption" for this tendency.

After watching people take on tribal behavior in the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), Veblen's worldview made a lot of sense to me. Another factor in my general acceptance of Veblen was a correlation between the names of sports teams and the names of small hunter-gatherer groups in the South Sea Islands. This was information we had been given in linguistics class. I thought it might imply that people had an underlying tribal behavior. Veblen had also been an early advocate of collecting statistical data to base economic theories on. Since I felt that theories that were untested were also unreliable, this seemed to be an important contribution to economics. Veblen was extremely detailed in his explanations of events, but in general evasive when it came to explaining the

point. In term of social interaction, Veblen had been greatly challenged. That is to say, one reason that I liked Veblen's thinking so much is that he was probably an autistic himself. The name of the ideology that claimed to be based on Veblen's thinking was very agreeable to me: institutional economics. I believed that institutions played a major role in the way that normal people interacted and I thought that a solid theory of economics should take this into account. We were told that mainstream economists took society to be the sum of the decisions made by individuals, but economist who had advocated institutionalism described how institutions shaped individuals.

"Weren't people in the present shaped by institutions in the past and won't future institutions be shaped by people in the present?" I asked. I wish I could remember the answer that I got, but it was to the effect that no one really understands how the effects of institutions on individuals affects the overall economy. My teacher was very concerned about the effect of advertising. If it were not for advertising, no one would think that Coke and Pepsi were better than other sodas. In McFarland's opinion, it is because people think that Coke and Pepsi are better that it would be a devastating problem for a store to have no chance to sell Coke or Pepsi. This is why it is dangerous to undercut the price of Coke and Pepsi too much. They can always get together and threaten to withhold their product.

"Didn't the demand for Coke and Pepsi get set by people listening in to commercials in the past, and is it not the legitimate demand for the products now?" I asked. Of course, I had to explain what legitimate meant. "People really do want Pepsi more than Kroger brand soda whether it came from a commercial or from parents or friends, and they make a decision about what to buy based on their preference." He was not willing to endorse my opinion, if he even understood it.

McFarland went on to describe the concern Veblen had about groups that had too much economic power. In Veblen's time, the groups that dominated the economy were called

trusts, and Veblen had written an entire book on the subject. It seems that the trusts were completely legal at first and not afraid to use their economic leverage to force small companies to join them. McFarland said that they were also willing to use sabotage.

He claimed that the owners of the trusts had often had high moral standards. He said that people like Rockefeller (who headed standard oil) and Duke (who headed the tobacco trust) “taught Sunday school”. He said that they believed they were the most moral people on earth. He said that in general when people accumulated money they believed that their hard work earned it for them. The irony being that they sometimes gained the money through dumb luck or mere inheritance. He went on to say, “peoples opinions are very much shaped by their interests. I know a lady who thinks that it would be terrible if oil prices keep falling. She says that if they cap an oil well in the United States then it will never be uncapped. That’s wrong. If an accountant determines that the cost of uncapping the well is worth the profits that are gained they will uncap the well. But, this person stands to make a profit from oil wells, and will lose money unless the price of oil goes back up.”

“Could it be,” I asked, “that they just say they think something and are lying?”

“It has to be their real opinion,” McFarland said, “If you ask somebody what they think right every way you can ask, and they give everybody the same answer then it must be their real opinion.”

“It is possible to repeat the act of lying.”

“You must live in a strange world!” The professor told me, “If someone says ‘good morning’ do you think that they mean it’s a lousy morning?”

“One time I asked a teacher what he meant by good morning, and he said that he meant that he wanted everyone in the class to shut up and listen to him.” That brought some laughter from the class. Over the long run, to believe that people thought what they said does not prove very safe.

McFarland explained that Veblen did not have a successful career, and had lived out the later part of his life on a farm. This implied that criticizing capitalism did not lead to worldly success. Of course, the social alienation of Veblen implied that he was held back by a number of social factors that may be symptoms of autism. We were told that there had been a group of economists, called the institutionalists, who based their views on Veblen; but at the time McFarland was teaching no one still applied that label to himself or herself. He claimed to have met the last person who took that label. It was explained that some living economists like John Kenneth Galbraith were called neo-institutionalist but never called themselves that. That was over twenty years ago, and while Galbraith can no longer be called a living economist, the label institutionalist is now more popular with living economists.

From the way that I argued with McFarland, it might sound like he would never want me back, but he did want me to take the second part of the class. Towards the beginning of the class he explained that he was glad to have someone who wanted to learn. "The guy in the back row will never learn," he said. He was referring to a person who repeatedly expressed dogmatic right wing views. I was taken aback by the suggestion that it was possible to tell what a person's future was from their attitude now. McFarland was frustrated not by conservatives, but by conservatives who would not listen to the opinions of others. "One time a president of the campus Republicans signed up for my class, but asked me if he would learn conservative economics, and I told him I don't know. He said that he only wanted to learn conservative economics, so I said I would explain how the class goes. I teach you theories, and you decide what you think."

The second economics class was more concerned with mathematical theories, and also gave substantial time describing Marxist theories (which are usually not algebraic). This was at the time when the cold war was ending, so communists were less scary than they had been in the past, but none of us were eager to learn about the theory behind communism, so we

were told that the point did not have to do with communism: McFarland said, “most of what Marx wrote was about capitalism. In fact, his largest work was called ‘Das Capital’ meaning just capital. Marx was the one who coined the word capitalist for the economists who disagreed with him.” And he went on to say, “In many ways, it is the best critique of capitalism available.” Something has always sounded wrong with that. In the more than a century since Marx’s death, has there never been a better critique of capitalism than Marx’s? It is unambiguous that capitalism is very different from what it was at the time of Marx, and yet it is hard to pin down the name of an author who has critiqued modern capitalism better than Marx critiqued nineteenth century capitalism.

McFarland did not try to defend the connection between Marx’s writings and violence. It is well known that Marx had predicted that as the oppression of workers continued there would be an inevitable revolt, and that because the capitalists were so determined to maintain power they would oppress workers to greater and greater degrees. “Don’t corporations have ways of avoiding that?” I asked, “Don’t they tolerate institutions like labor unions because it keeps the oppression from getting too bad, and don’t they let the country have a social safety net because it keeps people from being driven to revolt.”

“Marx thought that the capitalists were so greedy that they would never be willing to give up their wealth,” McFarland explained, but he agreed that it was not a realistic conclusion. He pointed out that there was a similarity between Marx’s idea that the revolution of the proletariat was inevitable and the Malthusian prediction that the final state of the economy would be a condition where there was so much overpopulation that productivity barely fed the population and widespread starvation meant that most children who were born would never be fed. Both economists had claimed that there was some inevitable future for the economy, and very few living economists think that the future is that easy to predict.

We discussed ideas about socialist societies. Marx had said almost nothing about what type of economy would come after

his predicted revolution, although he suggested that it would be some kind of socialism. “Economists started to think about what type of economy would exist in a socialist state right after the Russian Revolution,” McFarland explained. “You can argue that capitalism is better than socialism, or that socialism is better than capitalism, and people do argue, but they only convince people who already agree with them. Most socialist economies are hindered by government control. You see the government trying to direct every little bit of an economy wastes a lot of resources, and the government officials have a lot of power to act in their own interests, but the overwhelming influence of advertising in capitalist societies also hinders economic growth. Now there is a theory of competitive socialism where companies are controlled by workers who are free to compete with respect to price but are limited in terms of what advertising they can do, and it has many of the advantages of capitalism.”

Competitive socialism was something invented by Josip Tito, the communist dictator of Yugoslavia. It ceased to exist a short time after Tito’s death when Yugoslavia’s communist government was forced to hold elections, and the majority of people wanted a capitalist economy. The economy of many of the former Yugoslav republics is now short of where it was at the time of Tito, so the transition to capitalism is not obviously progress.

McFarland told us that communist countries were not completely undemocratic because they had to respond to popular opinion. Obviously, both America and Russia made efforts to shape public opinion through advertising. “These days almost every regime in a country with reasonable economic development has to listen to popular opinion. I have a friend who thinks that it’s because of the submachine gun. With submachine guns, it is perfectly easy for someone to sneak in and kill a government leader. You cannot be a terrorist with a knife, but you can do it with a submachine gun.” I have never accepted that explanation, because world leaders have reasonable security that keeps out terrorists. Further, what might

prompt a reasonably capable terrorist to attempt an assassination might have nothing to do with the opinion of the public in general. Yet, I cannot say that I have an alternative explanation.

The idea that whether it is better to have socialism or capitalism cannot be determined reminded me of how it seemed impossible to resolve arguments between so called philosophers, and it reminded me of the inability to resolve arguments about morals. McFarland continued to discuss this in the second semester of the class. One time he went to the board and wrote “Ayn Rand.” He said, “You can never prove this person is wrong. She is a philosopher and novelist who says that you should concern yourself with your own interests, and if you do care about other people then you’re doing something wrong.” He wrote the name on the board because he could not pronounce her first name. “It might be that it’s just pronounced Ann,” he said. The correct pronunciation is not the same as the pronunciation of Ann.

He did not accept that people with different values might want things besides money. When I was telling him about space colonization, I suggested that a number of good things could come of it. “It could distribute the human population in such a way that we would not be exterminated if something happened to this planet. It could lead to very renewable energy sources because resources mined from asteroids could be used to beam energy from the sun down to earth, so very few of earth’s resources would be used up.” Then I added, “It could have a positive effect because it would get people to work together for a common purpose.”

“Let me tell you,” he said, “I have been around for a long time, and the only thing that gets people to work together isn’t the common good; it’s money.” I had trouble making sense out of that because even when money was involved there seemed to always be other concerns: image, power and even creativity. The competition that I had watched in the SCA involving the desire to look important and impress others was somehow mixed with creativity, and I have never been con-

vinced that battles for supremacy in the boardroom are all that different. It is also interesting that writers and painters who I interacted with swore that they could make more money doing something else.

I was performing well in these economics classes despite my problems. My handwriting, spelling and arithmetic were still terrible, and whatever people might think, there would not be any easy solution to these things. McFarland made the suggestion that I was not trying when he commented on my term paper for the second semester of history of economic doctrine. The comment included the warning to me that there are “a glut of geniuses who do not succeed because they expect their sloppiness to be overlooked or because they lack industry.” In this context, genius was not a very desirable attribute because it implied that I had only skills that were of little value. I was spending hours and hours trying to improve my spelling skills and grammar skills to no avail. I knew very well that this was related to my difficulty keeping the job at McDonald’s, but there was no help for these skill deficits, and what I appeared able to do well might have inspired the genius comment, but the same comment implied that this was worthless.

I concluded that this economic system did not give me much of a chance. I had skills that might be useful to someone else, but my challenges would very likely prevent me from ever using my talents. I also concluded that the challenge was to gain the needed skills in order to meet society’s minimum expectations. I knew that my work in this area was not successful, and this made me often ignore the real worries that I had. I accepted that my future could be very bad, and I might be living for the present.

Living for the present had everything to do with my desire to interact with the teachers. Towards the end of the second history of economic doctrine class I made the suggestion to the teacher that “philosophy is just the opiate of elitists.” This was obviously a play on Marx’s comment that “religion is the opiate of the masses” which implied that religion was simply the pain killer that allows the proletariat to enjoy life when the way

they are treated fills them with pain. I was using education as a kind of opiate for my own predicament.

“I don’t know what you mean by opiate of elitists.”

“Well you know how you have told us that things like whether socialist is better than capitalist cannot be resolved. Philosophers think about that kind of question when there really is no answer as a kind of recreational drug. People who engage philosophy obviously think that they are superior to everyone else, and they are, therefore, elitists.”

I then showed him a quote from *Odd John* by Olaf Stapledon: “Philosophy is an amazing tissue of really fine thinking and incredible puerile mistakes. It’s damned good for the mind’s teeth, but as food, no bloody good at all.” I found the use of curse words quite amusing at this phase, particularly because people thought that I was unable to say such things. The quote is in the voice of the title character, who is described as a mutant of superhuman intelligence. It is safe to assume that a character supposed to be of superhuman intelligence is giving the author’s opinion: namely that what we call western philosophy is filled with errors. The point was that I thought philosophers knew there was something wrong with their profession. *Odd John*, incidentally, tried to understand the relationship of people to the universe, and this was what Douglas Adams was poking fun at in the quote that I gave at the start of this article.

McFarland did not argue, but he said, “Let me tell you, it’s one powerful high.”

McFarland did not advocate elitism. He told me that he thought you should listen to the typical person and what they have to say. He mentioned a time when he had asked a certain factory worker what the average income was in that area and was told “about 40,000.” He then asked this worker how the number was arrived at and heard: “‘Workers make about 20,000 and managers make about 60,000 so the average is about 40,000.’ The guy was darned intelligent, and he explained what that meant. The word average did not mean a geometric mean to him. When you listen to someone, make

sure you know what the words mean to them.” This was consistent with what I had learned in linguistics class. What people say in their own dialect is valid, and claiming that the I-language of an individual is not valid because it uses variant meanings of words is counter-productive. My poetry teacher also validated different dialects as valid. All concerned parties suggested in one sense or another that when listening to people you would be wise not to preoccupy yourself with trying to fault a person’s ability to follow prescribed grammar or dictionary vocabulary, but instead listen to what they have to tell you. The reason to listen is that you might find something valuable.

A question that might be asked is “how did this experience teach me social sciences and philosophy?” Social sciences are presumed to be a way of contemplating human nature, and whatever philosophy is, it is intended to teach us the deep thoughts of philosophers. It is further presumed that the idea of forcing certain classes on students of natural science is that their minds might be broadened to include these ideas. So you could ask, “was my mind broadened?”

The view of human nature that I got from these economists is very different from what is commonly discussed by sociologists and psychologists. It described people as rearranging their thoughts to defend their own economic interests, but believing that what they did was morally correct. McFarland’s comment, that most of the robber barons who used whatever means was needed to obtain monopoly power usually taught Sunday school, (and considered themselves the most Christian of people by implication) is a very profound insight into human nature and one that most people dare not consider.

He also challenged us to ask deep questions about the value that we put on things and how it influences our decisions. Making the point that advertising influences us to place a high value on Coca Cola when there is no definable difference between Coke and the store brand, is fairly informative, as is the understanding that Coke and Pepsi have studied the

demand curves of the general population and know where to set prices.

It is interesting that he refused to place himself in a capitalist or socialist camp. He took the capitalist view that people usually act to better their economic situation, and a revolution of the sort Marx predicted would happen would be unlikely to change this. On the other hand, he insisted that advertising and the power of the rich to influence capitalist markets had a very negative effect on the efficiency that markets were supposed to produce, thus implying that some sort of socialism might improve this problem.

I did not receive any large dose of philosophy, but was introduced to certain questions that philosophers ask. The question about the difference between what is and what ought to be is important, and not well known by the general public. It is further not well known that confusing the two ideas can be used to obfuscate your view of reality. That is to say, telling someone that you should not do x can prevent a discussion of what happens when you do x. Other ideas that we discussed included what is meant by dialectic, what is meant by positivism. Of course, nothing we learned would encourage us to select a school of philosophy that we adhered to. We also were certainly not encouraged to begin with the question: "what did Plato say about this?" though this question seems to dominate Western philosophy.

While I learned a great deal from McFarland, I also learned that he was indeed a dismal scientist because in the core of his being he wanted people to learn from him, and hardly anyone did. For the most part, students left the class without questioning the preconceived ideas that they came into the class with. He was further frustrated by the knowledge that while he was considered a leading expert in the economics of anti-trust laws, other economists had very little respect for this field of study. He would sarcastically state that collaboration between large corporations did not make for an interesting math problem, so other economist would usually not discuss collaboration. Other economists have told me that col-

laboration does factor into their equations, so the statement cannot be taken literally, but it probably meant that he was very frustrated that no one listened to him because his economics did not involve very sophisticated math.

His frustration fascinated me, and I made an artistic description of it in the form of a poem. I felt that no one was interested in what I learned in classes like economics either. Of course whining is a bad idea in general, so I had to think how I could put things in positive terms. I decided that it was best to write about a historical figure whose wisdom was vindicated by history.

How the Owl Was Silenced

The time lord had come to the court of Francis one,
Looking for someone who'd seen the suffering of serfs.
Finally he found a doddering old man who
 Couldn't even use his own right hand say like a gun,
 "The problem is landlords and tenants never speak."
The time lord asked "Do you tell the Frenchmen this?"
The old man said, "I spoke a tornado my first
thirty years and I blew my audience into a creek.
I told them how blood rushes through human veins,
And I told them how the earth spun around the Sun.
I spoke till my throat had come to fire but the only
Things they want to have are pictures to admire."
The time lord then asked, "Old man what's your name?"
The old man answered, "I am Leonardo"

The poem created a lively discussion in class. One of the students thought that it was a bad idea to use the expression 'time lord' because it related to a TV character called Dr. Who. This character from a British show often mused about going back in time to meet Da Vinci, and there was something very not high brow about putting such a character in a poem.

The reference to owl was less than obvious, and the later published version of the poem was prefaced with this quote from Mother Goose: "The less he spoke the more he heard, why can't we all be like that wise old bird." I had turned this on

its head by portraying the wise person as frustrated by the deafness of others. The instructor, Mr. Seay, had suggested that the ending did not make my point, so I eventually added a few lines, as follows:

The time lord asked, "how do only you know?"
And the old man said, "Nowadays wise men will only seek,
Wisdom that they can find in the Latin and Greek
But today's philosophers will never once try
To look at the world through an artist's eye."

When the poem was eventually published in the *Forbidden Lines* anthology, I was told to change time lord into time traveler so that it would not be mere Dr. Who fan material, so in the end the fan reference was not vindicated. The idea that careful examination of the world with an artist's eye was the key to wisdom did come from my reading of Leonardo's note book, but I was giving the idea some extra meaning. I believed that Dr. McFarland had gained a kind of wisdom by careful observation of the world that was analogous to artistic insight, and philosophy by itself would never achieve the same effect.

So I began to have an understanding of other people, but perhaps an understanding that they do not wish me to have. I also began to use the sophisticated reasoning processes that I had learned in these economics classes, and people began to refer to me as "brilliant." This poorly defined word is a much lonelier word than "stupid" because it's a word people use when they do not understand you, and it's a word that makes people jealous. The most positive thing that I can say about being called smart is that it makes people unforgiving of your failures, and this might be a positive. If your failures are forgiven, you will not try to overcome them.

Of course, I can define what it was about me that made people call me brilliant. I took time, energy and will power to listen to someone and figure out how what he said could be useful to me. By contrast most people in college focus on how the class can advance their material future, and wish that they did not have to bother with classes that are not a part of their

major. That is to say, I evolved enormously because I did not think or act the way that economists say that everyone acts. I had such a fear about my future given my economic status, that I did not dare think about it.

The reference to the artist's eye as a means to understanding was something that was starting to evolve at this stage. I was beginning to believe that some painters, poets and novelists were such careful observers that they were able to describe a kind of truth. I obviously saw McFarland as having this kind of insight. Where I got this idea about truth, I cannot pin down. McFarland is long retired; I have not spoken with him since the year that I graduated from UNC. So, I can only wonder how he would react to the impact he had on my life.

When I set out to understand my relationship to the economic system, something that was hard to pin down had shifted about my apparent intellect during my first year in college, and it was something that made me very uncomfortable. I have mentioned that in grade school I was often called "dumb", and I was comfortable with this. After my freshman year I was sometimes being called "smart" or even a "genius." I was uncomfortable. I had no friends who I could ask to make sense out of these strange statements. Under the circumstances, I could not help but think whether it implied that I had no skill or ability that I could use to make a living. Stupid means that you are not worth a lot, and if smart also meant that I was not worth a lot then it means exactly the same thing as dumb: you're different from most people and not very valuable. I want you to imagine the tumult that my mind was in during the first couple of years of college. No obvious future, no money to live a normal life, and no way to try to make sense out of the way other people describe me. Whatever smart meant, it would not help me communicate with other people. For one thing, taking pleasure mainly in understanding the economic theories is very different from existing to maximize income. McFarland was frustrated that students had little interest in learning what he had to say, but this was partly because they would receive no direct or obvious material benefit

from that learning. Wanting to learn for the sake of learning is a lot like wanting to advance the common good; it is not directly irrational, but it is very unusual in our society. To the extent that McFarland is correct about commercials influencing most people's thinking, to want to learn more is also not something encouraged by commercials, and hence not typical behavior. To complicate matters further, when people really do not understand that they are acting in their own interests, a person who understands that they are doing exactly that can be viewed as accusing them of hypocrisy. Understanding people can be very threatening because people usually want to be validated and not understood.

On the other hand, learning to enjoy learning in economics, science, art and poetry classes, did give me a great deal of ability to pass those classes. The ability to think through how people are likely act when they are rational improved my critical thinking skills enormously (even if it might have hurt my social skills). So, the combined experience of learning did give me the ability to graduate from UNC, if not the ability to be liked. Of course, my writing and social skills were still very poor. All I had gained was the mental ability to solve enough problems to pass classes. On the other hand, that is better than not passing classes, and having poor social skills and writing skills, also.

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