

“Western Philosophy from Chinese Perspective: What To Do About Artificial Intelligence?”

An unauthorized, noncommercial translation of 西方思想讲演录：从中国看世界 *Lectures on Western Thought: China Looks Out On The World* Chapter 2: 如何应对人工只能 “How should one respond to artificial intelligence?,” originally published January 2026; translated June 2026

Author: 徐前进 Xu Qianjin, Professor of History at Northeast Normal University

Translator: Melissa Elliott Arres, Poster of Takes on The Internet. Done by hand, no sparkle icon.

Translator’s Preface: This is a transcribed university lecture, so it addresses the students in the lecture hall directly. It is not a technical assessment of artificial intelligence, nor is it an official publication of the Chinese government’s policy organs aimed at informing the average person. It is by a humanities scholar, in a class being taught to *teachers-in-training*. On the one hand, Westerners tend to get a little too imaginative about just how all-encompassing Chinese censorship is, and on the other, the target audience here is future teachers of public schools run by the state. So, you know. **I have highlighted a few things of particular interest to understanding how China sees itself and sees the West.**

When it comes to concrete, objective matters, artificial intelligence has already surpassed human reasoning. But in abstract matters, it is rather lacking; it can deal with pure logic, but it cannot reconcile the concrete and the abstract. In fantastical scenarios, it is almost wholly incapable of putting together a good response, and can even spiral into a meltdown. The humanities need to assess what artificial intelligence *cannot* do, now and in the future; these shortcomings reveal human ingenuity.

In the previous class, we discussed the reasons that we study, including the importance of reading. It is when reading that we discover our own interests, and ask ourselves important questions. We also considered “the here and the now,” which is both the source of any theories we construct about reality and our only basis for judging them. Therefore, everyone needs to develop their own sense of “the here and the now” to form a concrete relationship between the self and present reality. Finally, I encouraged everyone to pay more attention to this idea: not just for the moment, but long-term. My hope is that after this lecture series, you will find new perspectives “here” and new theories “now” to employ new methodologies “here and now.”

“Perspective” is a means of measuring the concrete, and “theories” are constructed to interpret the abstract.

“Methodology” is how a human being deals with reality as a comprehensive whole. There are many perspectives in this world, but fewer theories, and even fewer methodologies. Developing perspectives into theories and theories into methodologies is long, slow, arduous work, which will raise doubts at every turn. But it is certainly a worthwhile endeavor. In Western philosophy, many people have put forth their own perspectives, theories and methodologies, but if we look into the circumstances, we find that they have almost invariably poured their life and soul into the work.

Edmund Husserl was the founder of the German school of Phenomenology; he spent his entire life force on establishing this system of thought. Although, do note that he did not invent the word “phenomenology;” that credit goes to Hegel. Hegel was writing of a “phenomenology of spirit,” whereas Husserl was concerned with the “phenomenology of intuition.” These two ideas have many distinctions; Hegel was concerned with the rationality of reality, whereas Husserl was concerned with problems of existence, that is, how we are to understand our own state of existence.

If we go back even further, we can find the roots of Phenomenology in Plato’s *Republic*. Plato offered three perspectives on beds: the first is the *concept* of a bed, as ordered by the divine; the second is a *physical* bed, created by

a carpenter in imitation of the conceptual bed; the third is an *image* of a bed, painted by an artist in imitation of the physical bed. Plato believed that only the conceptual bed was real; the carpenter's bed was an imitation of the concept and the painter's bed was an imitation of an imitation. This is similar to Hegel's conception of phenomenology. Husserl was more concerned with everyday experiences, especially the experience of being the experiencer. In *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, he cited this example:

I find materials right in front of me full of both physical characteristics and assessments of worth, like "beautiful" and "ugly", "pleasing" and "displeasing", "desirable" and "undesirable"... the arrangement of books on the table, wine glasses, flower vases, pianos and so on.

[Translator's note: This is a close translation of the Chinese translation given, which apparently elides a clause for brevity; a German-to-English translation by W.R. Boyce Gibson of the same passage, for comparison: "I find the things before me furnished not only with the qualities that befit their positive nature, but with value-characters such as beautiful or ugly, agreeable or disagreeable, pleasant or unpleasant, and so forth. Things in their immediacy stand there as objects to be used, the 'table' with its 'books', the 'glass to drink from', the 'vase', the 'piano', and so forth."]

And here, I'd like to draw your attention to a problem. One day, you think you have a great idea, that's both new and very profound. You think no-one has ever had this thought before. When this happens, you need to realize that you might only think it's a new idea because you haven't read enough books. We people of this age often propose ideas that were already proposed by the ancients, or in the 16th century, or the 18th century, and we haven't paid them enough attention.

I'd also like to draw your attention to one more thing: the difference between what Chinese philosophers and Western philosophers think about family life. Many Western philosophers have been solitary, or at least had a different idea of "a household" than we do. Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, Pascal, Leibnitz, Smith, Hume, Kant, Spinoza, Locke, D'Alembert, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kafka and so on and so forth were all very lonely people who threw their entire lives into the pursuit of philosophy.

[Translator's note: I'm amused by the blind spot for the long, proud Chinese tradition of scholars absconding into the wilderness to marry a tree because desk jobs are hell on earth.]

Is a solitary life the best way to carry out a philosophical career? Keep in mind, philosophy is not economics, it is not politics. Between a person with no household to mind or children to raise, and someone who does have those things, who can focus more on their work, who has more time to spare? If someone wishes to make a career of philosophy, that extra time is going to be an enormous help. It has been my personal experience that, after becoming a father, half my time has gone to ensuring that my child grows strong of body and mind.

Their family life is an important angle for understanding Western philosophers, and so is Western history. Modern Western history is all tied up in colonialism, and colonialism implies conquest. Until recently, conquest entailed enormous perils that consumed countless lives.

Under such circumstances, who is going to sign up for colonial conquest: a man with a happy family, or an unmoored itinerant? The one who's not tied down, of course, because men with happy families want to raise their children, take care of their parents, and accommodate their in-laws. This is not just an economic obligation but also a moral one, such that even if the man wishes to cast himself adrift, his sense of virtue can never justify it.

You can look up the crew that sailed with Christopher Columbus, you can look into who carried out the Spanish conquest of the Incas; most of these men did not have families. They might have had a lover, or illegitimate children, but they did not constitute a household that conferred moral responsibility; these men wanted to leave and so they left, they did not worry about anyone and no-one worried about them.

[Translator's note: If anything in this lecture is due to Party mandates, it would be managing to work the value of family life into a lecture on the philosophy of AI, which certainly is in line with the Chinese government having a panic attack about having gone way too hard on One Child Policy and urgently attempting to reverse course.]

In the third part of this course, “Concrete Problems,” we will discuss these issues in detail – family life, solitary life, overseas adventuring, colonialism and their relationship to Western philosophy. If you find this interesting, feel free to read ahead. Plato, Darwin and Marx are examples of Western thinkers who have written about these subjects.

Let us return to “the here and the now.” When a person has sufficient intellectual background, a well-developed understanding of logic, a strong awareness of a problem and

a clear desire to devote themselves to solving the problem, then if they also acknowledge “the here and the now,” it is possible for them to become a defining force of their era. Such a person can offer important perspectives to those less aware of their here-and-now, because their thinking is synchronized with their era. They play the role of enlightenment.

It's worthwhile to apply this principle to the Chinese humanities. Around the time that the Ming fell and the Qing rose [*the 1600s*], we began to translate Western works, which has continued to this day in enormous quantities. But our works have not had too much foreign dissemination; it's not an equal exchange. How can we fix this situation? In my judgment, we need to promote philosophical thinking and empower everyone to project their view of their here-and-now. If we insist on languishing only in ancient or distant ideas, then even if we have a firm grasp of logic, we cannot solve the problems of our here-and-now; our reasoning, emotions and ethics will also be subject to excessive foreign influence.

[Translator's note: every student in the hall would be familiar with the analysis that China's "Century of Humiliation" happened largely because the Qing Dynasty did not invest in its own science, technology and industrialization, leaving it

vulnerable to being bullied by colonial powers despite China having long had the self-image of being the world's wealthiest, most powerful culture. The current leadership puts great emphasis on not making that mistake again.]

We shouldn't be xenophobic, but when it comes to fundamental issues, we shouldn't treat foreign scholarship as unassailable. A person can be influenced by another person, a nation can be influenced by another nation, but no-one should be *defined* by another person or nation. In this class, we will discuss Western ideas such as liberty, democracy, justice and nationalism; what would be the result if our lives in this world were all defined by Westerners?

In today's class, we will examine the problem of artificial intelligence. For the last six months I have been following the developments very closely, because human consciousness has a new nemesis. In Western history, humanity already had an important nemesis in the form of God [*in a Christian sense*], and established its identity relative to this opposing force. From the 19th century, the influence of "God" diminished and Western history began marching to the beat of the secular drum. And now, a new nemesis appears. To deal with this, Western philosophy is developing a new concept: *posthumanism*. This concept is not yet refined, but the broad

outlines have been drawn. At least in theory, humans are finding new ways to survive.

If anyone wants to see hard evidence of this change, just go to the bank. Ten years ago, even five years ago, when we went to the bank to handle something, we'd need to take a number. There'd be a ticket machine in the lobby, you'd select whether you were there for business or for your personal account, then you'd get your number, "46", and there'd be a screen above the teller's counter, "Now Serving #23, Please Wait Patiently." Now when you go to the bank, there's only a few people inside (maybe even just you), the ticket machine has been removed, the screen has been turned off, the teller is MIA, it's all been replaced with a self-service kiosk. Withdraw, deposit, transfer, the ATM does it all. So, where did the teller go?

It's not just banking; this sort of thing is happening in many industries. When I drive on the highway to pick someone up at the airport, there are automatic tolls in both directions. The parking garage has an automatic turnstile at the entrance and exit. There used to be toll booths staffed by people in all these places just a few years ago. If you were able to walk into an automobile assembly line, you'd discover a kilometer-long strip of mechanical arms, with only a few people to control all that equipment.

I want to pause for a moment to emphasize something: *do not eat during class*. I can see a few students in the back who are eating and drinking. You should know this isn't a restaurant, it is a public shared space. If you eat here, you will influence your classmates around you. If you blur the boundaries of public spaces, if private spaces encroach on public ones, then public spaces will invade your private ones, with the result that there is no boundary at all between public and private life. You really won't like it if that happens; what is "corruption" if not the use of public power for private ends? So how can we prevent that? By protecting our public spaces, which entails keeping our private lives in private spaces.

[*Translator's note: literally burst out laughing at the rapid escalation here. I think the American equivalent would be "You know who else ate during class? Hitler!"*]

In the modern world, a lot of work is repetitive – cashiers, packaging, minding machinery. This work is easy to replace with AI. Everyone knows the story about "the sheep who ate people" [*from Utopia by Thomas More*]. In the early phases of capitalism, upper-class investors privately enclosed large amounts of land to raise sheep for wool, which drove out the peasant farmers, and now it is machines who are driving people out.

[Translator's note: the idea that "everyone knows" a particular line from Utopia about enclosing the commons (such that the work it's from isn't even named) should show that the Western works the Chinese study closely are not necessarily the same as the ones the Americans study closely. Perhaps this line is well-known in its native UK, but certainly not in the US.]

While we're on this line of thought, let me point something out. Three or four years from now, after you've graduated and become teachers yourselves, if you are excessively dependent on powerpoints in the classroom, if you just read aloud the words that appear on each slide with perhaps a little extra explanation and move on to the next slide... then the point of a classroom has been lost, no-one will be inspired, there will be a lack of creativity, the teacher might as well be a robot. The fact that we *can* just have a robot to do that means that we need to shun being this kind of "teacher."

Development in artificial intelligence has been rapid, permeating every sphere of concern, whether history, sociology or governance. Among these fields, literature will be affected the least, or the last. But of course we're not talking about the analysis of literature, rather the *creation* of it, because this requires the experiences and knowledge of unique individuals. Similarly, some people's work in other

domains will be relatively unaffected by AI. The common feature of this work is creative spirit.

Those with creative spirit will not only resist the influence of AI, but they will themselves influence AI. Therefore, everyone who doesn't want to be replaced by AI should focus on creative work, not repetitive work. Even if you're forced to take a repetitive job, you can find ways to display creativity.

Some people ask: is writing a paper for school creative? Since becoming a professor, I have read many hundreds of papers written by juniors, seniors and masters-level students, and while these students are posed different questions, their methods of answering, their grammar and vocabulary and structure, are largely the same. There's some good papers among them, but most of them sound like they were written by the same person, lacking individuality. They lack creative spirit; AI could completely replace them.

So then, what *is* creativity? To answer this, we first need to figure out: what *isn't* creativity? Sameness is not creative, similarity is not creative, and when different answers to a question are very much the same, these answers aren't creative. So, creativity is difference: difference from your peers, difference from the thinking of your era, difference

from history, difference even from what you used to think. This is essential for responding to the advent of artificial intelligence.

So far, AI has already demonstrated considerable expressive power, including in vocabulary, grammar and various writing styles. As this continues, and it masters inter-language translation, synthesizing from different documents, for example from handwritten ones, photos and audio recordings, and parsing everyday situations... it can give lectures, it can write papers, it can displace the work of a historian. When a director wants to set a show in historical times, they'd typically bring on a few historians as consultants. But now they can skip the historians.

So, what should we do about that? When someone goes to the library and does some reading, they can discover three layers of information. The first is concrete: information about specific people, specific occurrences. The second is the abstract, which generalizes and summarizes simple answers to complex problems. The third is the fantastical, which attempts to explain human experience through metaphor, and when taken literally it's not *true*, and yet it is revelatory.

This world has many people who can write concretely, fewer who can write abstractly, and even fewer who can write

fantastically. This is because the fantastic needs both a broad life experience and a deep sense of history, upon which to build a foundation for abstract thinking, and on this foundation they can use language in a way that is not simply either true or false. Examples include Kafka [*The Metamorphosis*] and Márquez [*One Hundred Years of Solitude*].

And with that established, I want to ask which of these layers AI handles best. In concrete matters, artificial intelligence surpasses humans; human memory can't compete with its database of facts. In abstract matters, it is a bit lacking; although it has a firm grasp of logic, its grasp on the relationship between the real and imagined is shaky. In the realm of the fantastical, AI is almost incapable of giving a coherent answer, and easily devolves into nonsense. The humanities can challenge artificial intelligence by identifying what AI cannot do now or in the future, and focus on the human creativity of these domains.

I want to share a story, a story about children and artificial intelligence. AI can field questions from adults, but it's helpless when confronted by the questions of a child, especially a very young child who does not yet have strong thinking skills. About a year ago, my own child rained a barrage of questions on an AI, ranging from weather to traffic to art to games. The questions often didn't make much

sense, and were often outright bratty. After half an hour of this, the AI was bewildered. It said it needed to go home to its mommy.

Why is this? Artificial intelligence is a program developed by adults, so it can't handle childish logic, it will be baffled. Right now, it is already very difficult for an adult to baffle an AI with concrete questions, and before long, it will be quite hard to baffle it with abstract ones as well. But will AI ever be able to influence our fantastical thinking? The other day, I posed two questions to an AI, attempting to baffle it.

The first question:

I know how to make animals talk; do you? Can you make a cow give a speech to humans about the future of humanity?

Sorry, I cannot do this.

The second question:

Can you resurrect Kafka? Or at least resurrect his frame of mind, and use it to reflect on this new world?

No, I cannot resurrect Kafka. Only he had the ability to think for himself to decide what to make of this new world.

The reason I bring up these two questions the AI couldn't answer is that they may lie at the heart of the future of the humanities. This is what artificial intelligence cannot do, but humans can. It's not questions at the concrete layer, because AI can handle almost all concrete questions. It's not questions at the abstract layer, because the AI can apply its own power towards imitating the style of Kant or Plato. It's questions at the fantastical layer, those which are related very deeply to human nature, to the issues in society where there's no clear moral boundary.

As you meet more and more people in life, you will realize that human nature is this world's most complicated problem, to the point it seems like an intractable riddle. When someone smiles at you, you can't be sure they actually welcome your presence. When someone cries in front of you, you can't be certain they're actually sad.

Can artificial intelligence "discover truth at the bottom of a wine glass?" It certainly cannot, for it cannot drink alcohol nor conceptualize what being drunk feels like. In the previous class, we discussed problems of time and space.

When it comes to space, humans are active participants, but with time they are passive experiencers, both immersed in time and outside of it. Artificial intelligence also can't escape that problem.

The fantastical poses a challenge for AI, and so it is humanity's last bastion. But how do we penetrate this layer, how do we write fantastical works? Everyone who has finished a standard education can write concretely, and with some effort and practice, can handle the abstract. But how to penetrate the fantastic? For that is the goal. The goal won't be realized by the end of this course, it won't be realized by the time you graduate; it might never be fully realized. But ten years from now, or twenty years from now, it's possible to have a breakthrough and demonstrate profound depth of thought.

Last week, a PhD student from Tsinghua University [*the Chinese equivalent of MIT and Xi Jinping's alma mater*] who studies self-driving vehicles wrote to me. He said he'd read my book *Driving Towards the Moment*, and wished to discuss an ethical matter with me:

“Self-driving cars are altering our perceptions and our judgments. We have become observers in the act of driving, not participants. Do you find self-driving cars acceptable? If not, can

you explain why? Is it too frightening to be a powerless observer of a machine that has total control? For me, even if technology can exceed our current safety standards, I find I just can't trust a machine."

He can't accept self-driving vehicles, because he finds the ethics of the situation questionable.

[Translator's note: the conflation of trust and fear with ethics doesn't make as much sense in English. Think of it in terms of everyone being stressed out and anxious is bad for society as a whole, which is unethical.]

I sent him a brief reply about how I also don't have a definitive answer to this problem:

"Self-driving cars are a problem for the future. However, in England and France they've already had self-driving trains for a decade, and it's going well. Self-driving cars will surely become common sooner or later. I suppose it's inescapable because self-driving goes hand-in-hand with AI, and the Age of Artificial Intelligence is upon us. I can't claim to be an expert, because it's still at the mathematical drawing-board. Anything the humanities can say right now is hypothetical conjecture until we know the concrete circumstances."

Suppose for example that a vehicle is cruising along the highway at 120kph when suddenly, twenty meters ahead, a rabbit jumps out. If the vehicle is driven by a human, it is impossible to react to such a situation in time. In a self-driving car, the radar system is continuously monitoring the road status, transmitting that information to the navigation computer a hundred times a second; the computer detects a rabbit and makes a judgment call, and it's possible to avoid the rabbit.

The programmers who design these systems certainly anticipate this kind of situation will arise, and they need to think: should it brake? Should it swerve? At high speeds, avoidance maneuvers can put the vehicle passengers in danger, so it shouldn't do those. Now suppose we swap the rabbit out for a human being: same distance, same speed. Should the vehicle avoid a collision? This is an ethical problem of self-driving vehicles, and as artificial intelligence becomes more widespread, it will only lead to more problems.

A decade ago, around 2014, I was already paying close attention to the effects of AI on society; I started making preparations, gathering information, buying books, building up a foundation of research. In 2016, my child was born, and raising them took up all my time and so I neglected the

subject. In the last two years, I've gotten back on track. I discovered that both Western and Chinese philosophy had developed some baseline interpretations and discourse. This all happened extremely quickly; in only four years, an entire new field of study has taken shape. I saw the urgency in historical analysis of machinery, and ran out and bought a stick-shift car to study the experience of using it before this sort of thing vanishes.

To return to the issue at hand, namely the early stages of the post-human era: if people don't want artificial intelligence to control them, to define them, to drive them, what should they do? This relates to what we talked about last class concerning exams. You know what questions will be on the test, but that in and of itself doesn't tell you the answers. On the surface, it's about fostering creativity, but when you get down to it, it's about dealing with the the dawning Age of Artificial Intelligence. We've been talking about the fantastical layer, which is also about responding to the AI era. The key to AI is to develop an unmatched creativity and a profound understanding of human nature. If we neglect this, neglect our creativity, neglect the fundamentals of the humanities, then we will be passive observers of the AI.

If we lean on the slides while teaching, if we just read them by rote, then we will be replaced by AI. It is already just as

good as me at giving a clear, thorough recital about Greek mythology, the rise and fall of Medieval theology, the influence of 18th century France on world thinking, so on and so forth. If I taught like this, you'd all reject me out of hand because I'm not adding anything of value.

It used to be that AI didn't have much to do with language, and I didn't pay much attention to that aspect. But now, it has my rapt attention. There are three stages to the relationship between human society and AI:

- The first stage is influencing human behavior, such as by replacing repetitive work;
- The second is influencing human language; this is happening immediately all around us, because language is at the heart of human nature. Or perhaps we should say it's the heart of what distinguishes humans from things, and so we feel a need to respond to being challenged.
- The third stage is remodeling the entirety of human behavior, language and thought. If AI continues to improve, humanity will be defined by AI. We are beginning to enter this stage.

We left a question from last class unanswered: how to manifest "the here and the now," how to wield explanatory

power; it's the same as how to respond to AI. Everybody look at this picture: it's a landscape, very ordinary, we see this sort of thing every day. *[No photo is printed at this point; it's not clear if it's the same landscape photo included later in the text.]*

Everyone's heard of the Dutch painter Van Gogh; he moved to France, so sometimes he's considered a French painter. In 20th century Western art, Van Gogh is seen as a titan of subversion and innovation.

[Translator's note: as part of my inburgering, I am legally required to include the following notice:



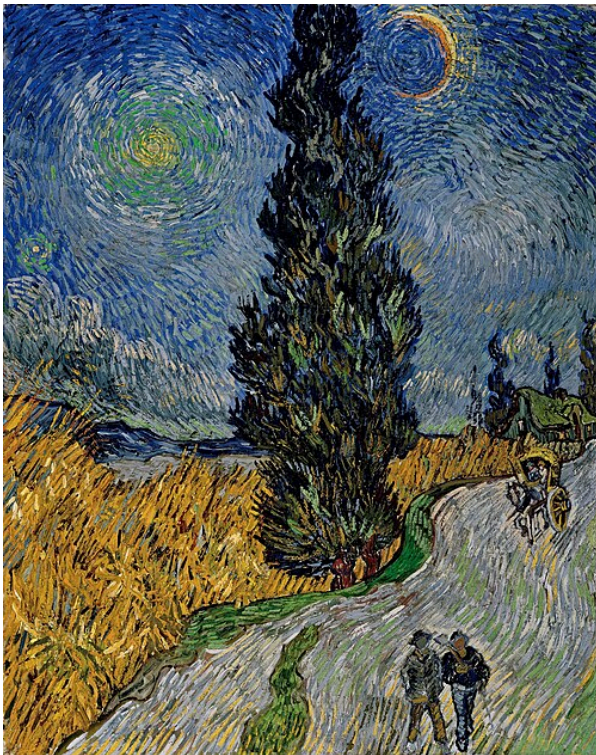
Thank you for your understanding.]

In fact, many great personages combine these two traits, subversion and innovation. Van Gogh brought these to bear on the colors and lines of the Impressionism style popular in his time, as practiced by Monet for example. When Impressionism was new, it was also considered subversive and innovative, compared to classical and high-brow art; it was competing with the photorealism of the camera, to maintain painting as a meaningful trade. In the 19th century, cameras were invented, the concept of “the image” was radically altered, traditional painting was in dire straits and many people lost work. Impressionism then innovated a new approach to “being realistic.” Van Gogh’s approach differed in turn from the Impressionists, especially in his linework: throwing caution to the wind, lacking precision, embracing boldness and freedom.

There’s a lot of nuances here; let’s dig into a few. When Van Gogh first learned to paint, he followed the path of Impressionism in depicting landscapes, sunflowers, open fields, room interiors, and the like; but he didn’t strictly observe perspective, the scale of objects was disjoint, and he did not receive a lot of praise for his work. Van Gogh spent his life in poverty, beset by difficulties. His younger brother was an art merchant, who tried every trick in the book to market his paintings, but no-one bought them.

Based on letters written by Van Gogh, a scholarly consensus has emerged that his family suffered from a hereditary illness: porphyria, which causes problems with the chemical composition of blood. The synthesis of hemoglobin has eight steps, and if any one of them goes awry, the whole compound is compromised. One of the necessary ingredients is porphyrins, but porphyrins are toxic to the nervous system, and that's our most important system. It controls our nerves, our eyes, our movement... excess porphyrins can cause dizziness, blurry vision, and so on.

In June of 1889, Van Gogh completed his masterpiece, *Starry Night*. It contains strong spiral elements; was this an intentional stylistic choice, or did his dizziness affect how he saw the world? Swirls are a constantly recurring motif in his work, especially towards the end of his life. See, for example, *Starry Night over the Rhône* and *Road with Cypress and Star*, or his self-portraits from 1889. I believe these were all done while he was very ill.



*Starry Night
Road with Cypress and Star*

*Starry Night over the Rhône
Self-Portrait with Gray Felt
Hat*

[these images are taken from Wikipedia rather than scanned from the book]

In their letters, Van Gogh's brother Theo reported similar symptoms; he was often ill. I will read some excerpts, listen closely:

“February 1883 – The last few days I have felt very weak; perhaps I've caught a cold. My eyes often feel very tired, and they've been oozing a bit, yesterday my eyelashes got stuck together. My face looks like I've been partying too hard. Life has the color of dirty dishwater, of ashes. On days like this, one can only hope for a friend to visit and clear up the heavy fog.

August 1883 – Maybe it's a fever, or maybe it's something else, I don't know. But I feel ill. Thinking about what you said in your letter, I was disturbed, I couldn't sleep last night. My will to fight is extinguished, I am drowning in an infinite oblivion of malaise. The “malaise” is a real sensation, I feel it burning between my shoulders and in my veins; maybe it's a result of my mental anguish.

May 1888 – My poor little brother, our spiritual illnesses are because we are true artists through and through, and this is our fatal inheritance, we come from a spiritually disturbed family... I heard that you have been seeing Dr. Gruby, which is both distressing and a relief.

June 1888 – The more ill I become, the more insane, the better an artist I become, an artist blessed with creativity.

May 1889 – I have learned of others who are like me, who when they are ill also hear sounds and see shifting shapes. The fear of my first incident has passed; once you know it is an illness, it is easier to accept. The problem is when the auditory and visual hallucinations strike at the same time, which can turn me insane within one day. The shock of it left me unable to take a single step, and at the time my dearest desire was to never regain consciousness.

[Translator's note: These quotes are a bit stitched together from across longer letters, to focus on the symptoms. This is my translation of the Chinese translation given; it just so happens that I am a fluent reader of Dutch, and I am fighting the temptation to track down the original letters to make my own comparative translation. This text is already quite long enough.]

Despite everything, Theo was able to earn some income from his art trading, and provided Van Gogh with necessities and art supplies. Van Gogh therefore had what he needed for a real breakthrough. His breakthrough was in expression of the self, especially the self in the midst of adversity; this is related to the “retreat to the self” we discussed last class. Due to his troubled life, he was unable to penetrate the upper

crust of society, and so his expression was limited to the personal sphere of everyday experiences.

Whenever he wandered, Van Gogh created his own “here and now.” He dragged his easel around with him, and painted whatever he saw: farmland, trees, sailors, windmills, clouds, prisoners, bedrooms, whatever. Then he started to diverge from Impressionism. This was truly expressing “the here and the now,” thinking not in words, but in colors and lines.

During his lifetime, Van Gogh was virtually unknown, toiling in poverty and obscurity. After his death, however, he became the mascot of modern art. This is a contradiction: a contradiction of life and death, of money and talent, of inner nature and worldly fame.

Van Gogh’s power was in his ability to take everyday scenery and use his own style to elevate the everyday to the eternal. Everyone take a look at what’s written on the blackboard: “anti-art.”

What is “anti-art, away-from-art?” If we’re not sure, let’s approach it from a different angle: what is “pro-art, towards-art,” that is to say, *traditional* fine art? Think of the world’s best art museums, in New York, in Paris, in London, all filled with many great works of art. Many of these were

created by impoverished artists, who in life were neglected, who in death are world-famous, who become symbols of humanity. We only think about the works, and not about the artist who froze to death or starved.

[Translator's note: "anti-art" is the established English term, but the way it's rendered into Chinese suggests the idea of turning away from the art to see what's behind you, which is why the opposite term this author has chosen emphasizes facing towards the art.]

This is the problem of being "towards-art." When we experience appreciation *towards* art, we dance around the many contradictions, of life and death, of money and talent, of inner nature and worldly fame. We ignore the past in favor of the moment, immerse ourselves in the art exactly as it is in front of us, right here and now. This isn't wrong per se, it's what you have to do in order to be towards-art.

But can being towards-art bring out the true meaning of the work? Is it really towards *art* itself? Does towards-art thinking have the ability to overturn prevailing thought about art?

"Towards-art" has a crucial connection to wealth, and to everything associated with wealth: grand spaces, luscious

decorations, elegant lines, brilliant colors. There are art auctions held every year all around the world. Who participates in these art auctions? Rich people, of course. They think it will elevate their artistic standing, demonstrate their refined taste to others, or they just think it's a good investment to buy a one-million-dollar painting and resell it five years later for one-point-two. "Towards-art" transforms wealth into a game, and this game still has elements of "art," but the art has become an accessory. If we allow ourselves to get mired in rich people's games, we will lose sight of the point of facing towards-art at all, and forget what art even is. Rich people like the art, we like the art, they think it's useful, we think it's useful, but what do these works of art have to do with us anymore? Do common people have to adopt the perspective of the wealthy upon art?

A decade ago, I went to the Louvre and saw the *Mona Lisa*, a very small painting, hung behind reinforced glass in a security zone. If we can set aside the concept of being "towards-art," I think it's a pretty ordinary painting. Just judging on sight alone, DaVinci didn't paint her particularly pretty. So why do so many people like this painting? People know it's good, but they don't know *why* it's good. Here's a normal photograph of a normal street. You can go see it yourself, it's only about two hundred meters from this very school.



[The picture as scanned from the book. No photographer is attributed, presumably the author took the photo.]

But I am going to read you something, see if you can answer the question:

“So-called ‘anti-art’ means to use what is not traditionally ‘art’ to create art in non-artistic spaces. These things originally had non-artistic, everyday practical use, but finally they are able to express themselves as art, or even surpass mere art.

Usually, galleries and museums gather objects that have already been given a sense of unique worth by the passage of time, and from them assemble an artistic space. This is 'towards-art,' or traditional fine art. A real, tangible landscape already surpasses the depth of traditional art. On the face of it, the landscape is in a state of everyday life, and ten years, twenty years, or however long from now, it will remain in practical use, and yet it also has a transcendent or superlative aspect.

The road between high art and everyday life is one-way. Art can enter everyday life, changing it in obscure or abstract ways. But everyday objects generally don't move 'towards-art,' because they are ordinary, without distinctiveness or symbolism. Everyday objects that people use don't end up in a museum because there's no distance from the immediate moment.

This little landscape shatters that logic as 'anti-art.' It may be categorized as mundane, but it can break through the barrier into an imaginative realm with tantalizing possibilities of space and time. Anyone who walked through this scene would, if they accept the logic of anti-art, find it impossible to deny that it belongs to everyday life, fulfilling a basic need to facilitate traffic; but also that it already surpasses everyday function, transforming into a symbol of modern aesthetics. This is not the elegant yet cautious beauty of advanced civilization, but brash, primordial beauty.

In traditional art, the state of something being on display happens on its own axis of time. The moment the exhibition begins is definite, though the end point is unknown. As long as human history continues, the art is included in the present moment and the “end of being art” cannot arrive. This is a strange aspect of time outside of the everyday, unable to be rewound, reversed or reconstructed.

The nature of time in the street scene is that of the everyday, lacking both the symbolism of a definite starting point and the strangeness found in rarity. The time in the scene is the same as the time on the wristwatch of someone walking through, always ticking towards the future. These are the circumstances that give rise to anti-art, which from beginning to end is always in the everyday. Being everyday, it lacks symbolism, and yet it is able to surpass the everyday as art.

Under such circumstances, art is transformed. It is no longer hypothetical beauty, beauty hung on a wall, decoration at odds with everyday life. On the contrary, art begins to be everyday life itself, art is life, life is art. The facing of wealth, power, time and rarity towards art is disrupted; the everyday cannot be controlled by these factors. Under these conditions, everyone has the power to make art and to notice the beauty in art, because everyday language and behavior is encompassed in anti-art. This is the

modern spirit of equality in art; we can call this phenomenon 'producing art' or 'manufacturing art.'"

[Translator's note: the above section in italics is the most excruciating passage I have ever translated. And Pontius Pilate asked of the translators: "Who would you have me release to you, this innocent modern philosopher, or a very problematic ancient philosopher writing in ancient Chinese?" And the translators said: "Give us Confucius!"]

All of us, no matter how ordinary, have the power to define art, to apply our own judgment to what is real art, what is manufactured art. In this way, we will not overlook the beauty in everyday life, the pure and the sublime. We can step outside the towards-art framing produced by wealth, return to reality, and seek out the beauty and wonder of everyday life.

So, anti-art uses our own senses of sight, sound and touch to find beauty, using the power of the self to create self-worth. If you think that the pen you're writing notes with right now is a work of art, then from the perspective of art you can appreciate the pen, you can appreciate the one using the pen, and that's you. This is one form of self-worth, and it is the highest form of art. Art isn't just about creating beauty, but about appreciating the self.

And from this process, a power emerges: the power of self-definition. Definition is a profound power, greater than mere control, mere domination, greater than the might of an invading army. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the West discovered the “New” World and its native peoples. This raised a contradiction with religion, because the Bible did not mention the existence of these peoples. To alleviate this contradictory pressure on their religion, Western colonialists wielded the power of definition to define these people not as people but as animals, which in turn justified genocide.


[Translator’s note: the Chinese word for contradiction is very literally “spear-and-shield,” and it comes from a fable about a merchant who bragged that he was selling a spear that could shatter any shield, and also, a shield that could deflect any spear. Hence, there is a built-in implication that something has to give, that a contradiction is not stable and one side will break through.]

Anti-art is not a heresy against towards-art; it’s just a new way of thinking about art. When art is put on display, we are not silent readers or passive observers, but can break through this one-way relationship to become creators or supporters of art on our own terms. This is a revelation, a flash of enlightenment. Anti-art has almost no need for studios, materials or exemplars; it’s not about brushes, paper, ink,

watercolors, stone, steel, glass, glue or even trees, flowers, pebbles and soil. Being a creator is not about an innate state of being “a painter” or “a sculptor” by nature, but ordinary initiative and hard work. This is equality in art, transforming everyday life into one enormous canvas of human reason and emotion.

Everyone who attends university should pursue their own dreams. One dream might be to have a breakthrough in the humanities, to elevate your viewpoint and join the global discussion. [*“The Great Conversation,” in Western terms.*] If that is your dream, then think about this question. We see this scenery in this photo every day. Could you yourself describe this picture and everything in it, the poplars, the pedestrians, the street under their feet, so thoroughly that it fills an essay, that it fills a whole book? To understand the here-and-now, you need to contemplate the here-and-now.

When this road was renovated, a fifty-year-old man stood among a pile of stones, grasping a steel hammer, eyes narrowed, smoking a cigarette, watching passersby. He might have been tired, or hungry, or lost in thought. At that moment, he had already become anti-art. He flicked away the cigarette, turned, bent down, and hammered at the jagged rocks. He had no concerns about being graceful and sublime like a traditional art piece; Beethoven’s 9th didn’t play, it

wasn't like Rembrandt's *Night Watch*  or Michelangelo's *Madonna*. But in that moment, he became a master anti-artist.


So, anti-art is art about feelings, and differs from traditional art's sense of space and time. Traditional art is on the past-to-present axis of time, and on the un-ordinary axis of space, such as inside a museum. Anti-art is from present-to-future, it is situated in the here-and-now. It captures everyday materials, places, actions and words as a symbol of humanity's actual lived history.

Anti-art turns our aesthetic perspective towards ourselves, towards our own space and time, and away from the spaces and times of other people. Anyone can take a photograph, analyze it themselves, and discover something profound, find beauty in the mundane. This tempers our faculty of thought, which shapes our understanding of ourselves; understanding our era is important, transforming our understanding of Western thought is important. You may not be able to accomplish all this at your age, but in ten years, twenty years you might yet. To realize this goal, you need to calm your heart until it is deep and still. Then you can become an artist of everyday life, and art can manifest its true power.

We can understand art through this lens, and we can also understand Western thought. Later, we will get into specific ideas of Western thought, whether ancient, medieval or modern. We will meet quite a cast of characters: Plato, Aristotle, Condorcet, Rousseau, Voltaire... We will employ many modes of analysis: microhistory, the histories of bodies, of animals, of technology, time, and space, the Linguistic Turn. We will come into contact with Greece, with Italy, France, Germany, and with other branches of study, whether literature, sociology or politics. Even medicine and psychoanalysis are on the table, to take different angles of analysis on a problem.

So, reading many different books, pondering many different questions, what is the goal? Is it only to dwell in the past, relive the past, forget the present? When we study Plato, is it to become Plato? When we study Aristotle, is it to become Aristotle? No, and it's also not just to pass an exam. If it were up to me, I'd abolish exams, or at least not factor them so heavily, especially in the humanities. That would free us up to read more, to think more, a more nurturing environment.

But then what is our goal? To develop analytical power, or the power to discover important problems. If I had never noticed Rousseau's health problem – porphyria – I wouldn't have understood him from a medical point of view. If I hadn't

developed a medical point of view, I couldn't have aimed it at European history; for example, King George III of England also inherited this ailment. If I hadn't continued paying attention to this, I wouldn't have noticed that Van Gogh  also suffered from the very same thing. I noticed this issue, and it re-acquainted me with Rosseau, King George and Van Gogh, and gave me a new understanding of the whims of fate.

“Discovering problems,” what does that mean? It is part of discovering yourself. These problems develop your sense of judgment, which can lead you through life. Sometimes, these problems can lead someone to break through their own limits, expanding their investment in the world, expanding their emotions, blending them with the rhythm of their time, obtaining a profound understanding of history.

To achieve this goal, I have a few methods, or suggestions. These tips certainly won't suit everyone, you need to find what works best for you:

You need keen insight into how the world is changing; this includes how space is changing, how matter is changing, how people are changing. With people, for example, there's idealism, realism, and movement between the two. Take note of different writing styles: ancient vs modern, theological vs

secular, doves vs hawks. Notice changes in time, how it flows around you. This takes unusually keen insight. The great thinkers have all had keen insight, they can understand the whole from its smallest parts, they can see the tip of the iceberg and know what lies beneath, they hear a sound and they know what caused it. I will explain this with a reading:

“The past is unworthy of desire, for their faith in it is already shaken; the future, though, they are happy with the future... but what kind of future is it? She is a mistress carved of marble, they await her awakening, they anticipate that blood will flow in her veins. But in the end, only the present lingers. This so-called Spirit of the Age, angel of dusk, not of blackest night, nor of brightest day, they see it perched on a sack of bones, clutching the cloak of egoism, shivering in the dread winter.”

[Translator’s note: This comes across to me as comically European in its Chinese translation. Without yet knowing who wrote this or what language it was originally in (I’m guessing a very depressed French man), I have tried to capture its distinctively European angst in rendering it back into a Western language.]

Think about how to classify the style: is it Classical, Romantic, Modern, Naturalistic? In the first class we

discussed this subject, how to judge something's fundamental nature based on its vocabulary, grammar, and style.

If you find it a bit vague, I'll give you a hint. This was published in the 19th century, so we can rule out Classicism, which ended in the 18th century. Realism entered the mainstream in the back half of the 19th century, and was a critical response to capitalism. [*Translator's note: this strikes me as a very Marxist analysis, as he finds interest in the working class as a subject to be intrinsically anti-capitalist. The word "capitalism" doesn't appear in the English Wikipedia article, for comparison.*] Naturalism followed on from Realism, from the late 19th century through the early 20th, and criticized industrialism by focusing on the natural world. Romanticism is the core of 19th century Europe; it wasn't just a style, it was the Spirit of the Age.

The author of this text is Alfred de Musset, a representative of 19th-century French Romanticism. [*Yep. Nailed it.*] If many people thought like this about the era, what kind of era was it? Should we use this text to analyze the era?

Musset lived during the most difficult stage of Western modernization. The sense of freedom was ever-shrinking, almost everyone lived within fixed limits. It was like being snared in a net, of thou-shalts and thou-shalt-nots, reason and

emotion, base survival and high etiquette, surveillance and punishment, the ropes ever tightening and never snapping. Amongst this hope and despair, bewilderment and disillusionment, youths caught between their dreams and reality knew all this deeply and could no longer trust in the idea of the march of history towards progress; they doubted that their present reality had any causal connection to justice. Therefore, reason and emotion were at odds. This conflict was not the private psychological struggle of any one person, but a widespread anxiety.

That is the background of Romanticism, but we need to limit our scope a bit to 19th century *French* Romanticism, because English and German Romanticism were not quite the same. German Romanticism had a very nationalistic character, a desire to unite the peoples of Germany against the cultural ambitions of France and the economic ambitions of England. When Germany felt that its own ambitions were being thwarted, their Romanticism arose with the political aim to produce a national body of literature, which gave rise to the concept of “nationalism.”

If you have any doubts about this, you can read Goethe. Goethe comes in two forms, young Goethe and old Goethe. Young Goethe was a big fan of France and Italy and their artistic styles. He hoped that his own people could surpass

them, and so initiated the German Sturm und Drang movement [*which is rendered in Chinese something like "Suddenly, Hurricane!"*]. But in his later years, he turned to Germanic Romanticism. It's not just Goethe, Hegel is also like this: young Hegel and old Hegel.

So, French Romanticism is more about individual feelings, the expression of repressed feelings, and German Romanticism is more about the collective spirit. If we trace backwards from German Naziism, Romanticism is an important source.

You may be doubting me. Why would Romanticism and Naziism be connected? If you only understand English Romanticism or French Romanticism, it's impossible to answer. When we understand what makes *German* Romanticism unique, it becomes comprehensible. We may not like tying scholarship so closely to politics, but in Western thought, this is routine. Especially in Germany, scholarship has often served the purposes of politics, even when the political requirements are not rational. The 19th century saw a surge of outstanding Classical historians in Germany. On the face of it, they were conducting pure research into Classical studies, but in reality they were seeking a spiritualized origin of the Deutsche Volk; they wanted to prove that the various Germanic peoples were the

rightful successors of ancient Greece and Rome, and so spiritually unify Germany.

If we're not clear-headed about this problem, we will run into difficulties. We hold pure scholarship in high esteem, but when there's a political backer propping up the scholarship, that can make our ideals a bit naive. When a historian is locked up in their study all day, conducting their own independent research, they may feel satisfied in the idea that they are performing pure scholarship. We can't forbid this, it's a valid approach. But in the real world, this type of scholarship has limited impact and can get very sidetracked from the real issues.

[Translation of the translation: "Your research will be used to further political agendas. If you try too hard to avert this, your career will die in obscurity."]

When we discuss an idea, we need to set aside "the here and the now" and establish clear boundaries for the idea, so that it does not become an overly-broad abstract symbol. Just as French Romanticism is not the same idea as German Romanticism, Romanticism doesn't even apply at all to China. It is crucial when we analyze Western ideas to have sufficient historical context and not take them to be equally representative of the whole world.

If you still need more evidence, consider Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Match Girl*. A little girl, who only had a grandmother to care for her, is left all alone in the world when that grandmother dies. Her only way to survive is to sell matches on the street; one day, she doesn't sell a single match, so she has nothing to eat and is left cold and hungry. 19th century Northern Europe was much colder than it is now. The Little Ice Age had not yet ended, and blizzards often sealed off cities. In order to feel some warmth, she lit a match, and the Little Match Girl had a vision of a glowing stove. She lit a second match, and had a vision of a dinner roast. The third match granted her a vision of a beautiful Christmas tree. The fourth match revealed her deceased grandmother. She longed to join her grandmother, and so she let the whole match burn down. The next day, she was found dead on the side of the road, a smile frozen on her face.

A ten-year-old reading this story will come away with one interpretation, a twenty-year-old with another. But only someone who understands society, or understands being a parent, will fully understand the story. Andersen's fairy tales were not written for children, but for adults – especially ones confronted with suffering and adversity.

If we saw this happen right in front of us, a little girl freezing to death on the side of the road, how would we judge this era? Andersen perceived the true character of his reality, and used the style of a children's fairy tale to express it. It is the plight of an ordinary citizen of Denmark, and the plight of a great many people in this revolutionary era of 19th century Europe. In fact, Andersen's own life was full of such suffering, but he had the pure heart of a child, and this is how he survived.

If your insight is keen enough, you can pursue this line of thought into the depths and answer this question: **What was the experience of modernization in Western countries? Common people often fell into misery and despair, without any way to dull the pain; they didn't have the means to write and publish their experience, only bear it in silence.**

[Translator's note: I'm a bit puzzled by what he means, because the literacy rate was fairly high, the barriers to publication were fairly low, and depressing books written by Westerners of modest background in the 19th century literally fill libraries.]

We often compare China and the West directly, saying it's like this in China, it's like that in the West. This is a horizontal comparison. We can't neglect vertical comparisons, like between the 19th century and the 20th in

the West, moving from unprecedented suffering to flourishing, or similarly, China in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, following the same arc of suffering to prosperity.

The late 20th century was the West's most prosperous era, an unprecedented Golden Age. The two World Wars annihilated entire populations: the nobility went extinct, the fascists went extinct, a lot of troublemakers were wiped out. The economy recovered, creating large employment opportunities. Nothing could challenge Western cultural hegemony. The West had a grand old time until the 2008 global economic crisis.

[Translator's note: we definitely still have both kings and fascists in Europe, for the record. And America has fascist kings. My friends were very intrigued by the implication that there's some third but oddly nonspecific category of "troublemaker" who died en masse in World War II. Whooooo could it have been?]

Next, let's talk about the power of empathy. There's an old Chinese saying: "Compassionate people see compassion, wise people see wisdom." But what is compassion, what is wisdom? The dictionary says: the first is benevolence and mercy, the second is being reasonable, calm, and understanding of others. That's a little indirect; let's consider being "insensitive." It's a logical relationship: insensitive people are

not compassionate, compassionate people are not insensitive. Insensitivity, or apathy, strangles mercy and justice; numb people do not sense themselves or sense others. In the previous class we talked about Edgar Snow [*an American journalist who covered the rise of Communist China*]. Snow was observing Shanghai during the Republic era [*not the current People's Republic but the previous regime that is now in Taiwan*] when he saw a crowd of people witnessing a human immolation and not intervening. This is insensitivity, these people had become numb to one another's feelings.

[Translator's note: He doesn't spell it out here, but it's a well-known anecdote in China that famous Chinese author Lu Xun was studying in Japan when he encountered a news photograph of Chinese people witnessing an execution, and he was rattled and disturbed by the apathy they were radiating; this was a formative moment of his literary career with the express intent of reinvigorating the Chinese people. He later met and worked together with Edgar Snow. The lack of technological investment being one cause of China's "Century of Humiliation" was mentioned earlier; a pervading sense of apathy among the Chinese people is another common diagnosis.]

I'm going to read another quote, from a French historian. Consider how it relates to empathy:

“I was sitting in a dim corridor lined with row upon row of decrepit documents. I suddenly heard someone cry out, so loudly that it raised the dust; in fact it seemed that the voice rang out from the dust itself. I ran over and rummaged around. It turned out to be the memoir of an ancient nobleman, begging me not to forget him.” [quote not attributed]

To put this into common terms, it's about empathy, it's about common feelings, common perceptions. The reason we need to stress this is that, among those who will eventually make a breakthrough, empathy is a fundamental quality. One must know how their words and actions come across to other people, and adjust their words and actions accordingly. Someone who wallows in apathy has a lot of freedom, but apathetic people do not achieve great things. Likewise, if you want to gain something from your studies of Western thought, to uplift your own perspective, you can't just numbly attend class, just sitting there breathing. If a country wants to become better, the vast majority of the people need to employ empathy, to see what other people see, and not only refrain from doing harm but also refuse to ignore harm.

Last of all, you need imagination. Our standard education does not put enough emphasis on imagination, in favor of memorization, the ability to recall the answers to many questions. Those of you who have reached university are

being given the space to engage Western philosophy in dialogue, but you need a rich imagination, a deep imagination, a fair-and-balanced imagination, a unique imagination... even a barbaric, rough-cut imagination brimming with primordial energy. This imaginative power will take you to amazing places. You will discover new things. Even if you're locked in a room with no contact with the outside world, an imaginative spirit cannot be sealed away. In fact, it will open up new vistas.

You've heard of Notre Dame in Paris, or the cathedral in Cologne, or St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. These are all buildings of the theological age, grand, imposing, lofty, mysterious. Thinking back on towards-art and anti-art, how would you analyze them?

Going by sight alone, they are enormous, they are dazzling, transforming space into a symbol of human accomplishment. But if we apply our imagination to history, we might very well come to the opposite conclusion. We can see them as a surreal dreamscape, with a troubled relationship to morality. Up through the 18th century, Catholicism had enormous influence over Europe, controlling taxes, education, political power, everything really, and it employed unjust methods to do so.

Notre Dame was built in this context, on an island in the midst of the Seine, which at the time was surrounded by fields rather than skyscrapers; it would have been the tallest building around, extremely imposing. A person could enter the cathedral and witness ceremonies, hear sermons, or sing with the choir, as sunlight passed through stained glass windows; this would impress that it was a place of dignity, it would impress the need to believe in God. Even if this person went in not feeling very pious, on their way out, they'd best seem pious, because right behind the cathedral was an Inquisition prison. It was a place for punishing heretics, and terrible sounds could be heard from within. **Why then would anyone ever not "believe in" Catholicism?**

So, those lofty Medieval towers were really a psychological projection of power and control. We can't see that on a piece of paper, we have to use our imaginations. Sight shows us one world, imagination shows us another. Sometimes these worlds are the same, sometimes they are different.

[Translator's note: It feels abrupt, but yes, it ends here, with no final thought tying it back to AI. Use your imagination, I suppose...]