

critique

A close-up photograph of a person's hands clasped together, holding a red cup. The hands are positioned in the center of the frame, with fingers interlaced. The person is wearing a light-colored, ribbed sweater. The background is a soft-focus image of autumn leaves in shades of orange, red, and brown, creating a warm and cozy atmosphere. The overall composition is centered and balanced, with the hands and cup as the primary focus.

A Ransom Fellowship Publication

2017 Issue 5

**WITH TRUTHS TO PONDER, AND
POEMS OF SUMMER FEARS
AND AUTUMN PLEASURES**

CRITIQUE



2017 Issue 5 © Ransom Fellowship

EDITOR

Denis Haack

ART DIRECTOR

Karen Coulter Perkins

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Donald Guthrie

Professor of Educational Ministries
Director of PhD Program in Educational Studies
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Illinois

Denis and Margie Haack
Co-founders, Ransom Fellowship, Minnesota

Bonnie Liefer

Vice President for Marketing and Communications
CCO, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Henry Tazelaar

Chair, Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology
Professor of Pathology
Mayo Clinic College of Medicine, Arizona

Paul Woodard

Life Care Retirement Community Chaplain, retired
St. Louis, Missouri

CONTACT CRITIQUE:

www.RansomFellowship.org
5245 132nd Court, Savage, MN 55378
ransomfellowship@gmail.com

ABOUT CRITIQUE: Critique is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

RECEIVE CRITIQUE: Critique is not available by subscription. Rather, interested readers can request to be added to Ransom's mailing list, which is updated frequently. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added to the mailing list automatically unless requesting otherwise.

Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Letters from The House Between* (formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*), a newsletter by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life and gives news about Ransom's ministry.

COPYING POLICY: Feel free to make up to 50 copies of any article that appears in *Critique* for use with a small group. We only ask that you copy the entire article, note the source, and distribute the copies free of charge.

HEARTS & MINDS: Hearts and Minds bookstore donates 10% of your purchase to Ransom Fellowship if you mention us when placing your order.
www.heartsandmindsbooks.com.

2017:5 CONTENTS

1

EDITOR'S NOTE

Time's Relentless Passage

2

DIALOGUE



4

POETRY

Wasp

by Emily Awes Anderson

Coffee

by Scott Schuleit

DISCERNING LIFE

When to Argue...or Not

6



8

DARKENED ROOM

The Real Test

a film review of *Ex Machina*

by R. Greg Grooms



11

OUT OF THEIR MINDS

The Recovery of Classical Greek Thinking

an excerpt from *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650*

by Carlos M. N. Eire

RESOURCES

An Extraordinary Ordinary

thoughts on *Mink River* by Brian Doyle

A Necessary, Perilous Venture

a review of *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650*

by Carlos M. N. Eire

On Believing, Knowing, and Finding

a review of *How Do You Know That?*

by Ellis Potter

12

Time's Relentless Passage



My wife and I are arguing again. It happens every year about this time. I notice a tree whose leaves are changing color (usually a maple here in Minnesota), point to it, and exclaim joyously that autumn is arriving. She retorts with a grin that the poor thing is merely stressed, and that there still are several more weeks of sweet corn (a sure sign of summer).

Time's passage is a mysterious thing, but pass it does. We live always, only in a present moment, yet that moment is always slipping away into the past. We anticipate a future and make plans but never get past the present moment that slips away so quickly. And for most of us most of the time, it's a rather disappointing passage, never achieving all we had planned in the time we hoped.

In his classic *Confessions*, St. Augustine reflects on the nature of time, finding clarity that is still mostly mysterious. Storytellers weave narratives in which time bends, so that we go back to the future, or the past, and are fearful of the results. The ancient pagan gods are all subject to time while the Christian God, who created it, is revealed as the I AM, the infinite one for whom all moments are eternally present. This one calls time good, though his followers mostly disagree and tend to

curse it more than bless.

Why am I not content with God's good gift?

"Christian contentment," Jeremiah Burroughs says, "is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition." I want more of that sweetness.

Growing so that contentment is a habit of the heart is never merely an intellectual exercise. It is helpful to read and think about contentment, of course, but knowing a quietly contented person and learning contentment within the flow of everyday life is what really shapes us. And there is precious little in our modern world that nourishes contentment about time.

It used to be that churches remained open during the day so that people could slip into the cool, still sanctuary to sit and pray and think. If I happened on someone wasting time like that I would be tempted to ask if everything was okay.

When his people were in Egypt, God called Moses to bring them out slavery. He led them across the Red Sea into the wilderness and to a mountain. There God met them, the top of the mountain enshrouded and trembling with his glory, a holy moment if there ever was one. God told Moses to walk up into the clouds, and so he did. We know that God revealed his law to Moses there but, beyond that, Moses doesn't share many details of the encounter. We do know, however, that "Moses delayed to come down from the mountain" (Exodus 32:1).

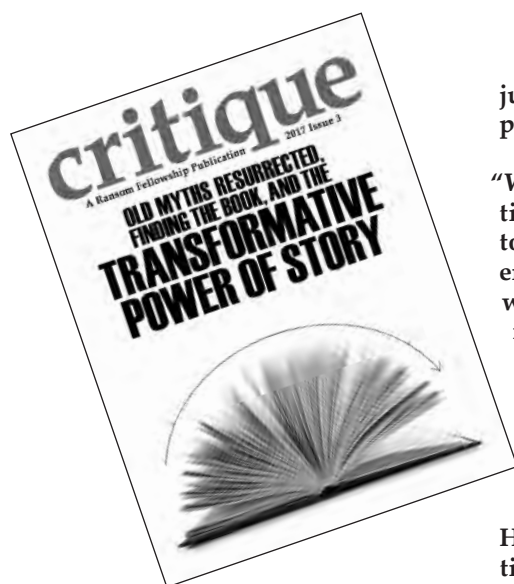
Imagine a leader making an entire nation wait because he delayed, wanting to spend more time with God. From the standpoint of modern leadership theory it didn't turn out well. The Israelites

waiting for him got impatient (32:1), middle management was corrupted (32:2-5), and the entire enterprise lost focus (32:6). Who can blame them? Well, God, actually (32:7). In this narrative it was Moses who was content with the slow passage of time and the Israelites who weren't, and being discontented led them into trouble.

Uncertain about what the future held, they forgot the past and misused the present. "Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now," Jesus said, "and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes" (Matthew 6:34). I cannot stop or slow the flow of future to present to past, but I can, apparently, ride the relentless passage of time with quiet contentment because the I AM for whom every moment is an eternal present has become my Father.

As I think about how to end this piece more time passes, but nothing clever comes to mind. And so, amen. ■

Source: *Jeremiah Burroughs (1599–1646) in The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment.*



To the editor:
Denis,

A few weeks ago we hosted another article discussion group, this time using your “Faithfulness in Political Uncertainty” essay [*Critique* 2017:2]. We had five people join us (mix of men and women) and found a lot of points for discussion. I thought you might be interested in hearing some thoughts, hopefully representing the group but obviously including my own perspective.

First of all, the topic and the contents felt very relevant. We thought it helped remind us of some key ground rules: be present, honor authorities, and be people of hope. “Faithfulness in the ordinary” was helpful, as we all related to the sense of being pulled in many directions and a sense of guilt or frustration when we fail to meet expectations (and passions) of others. Silence is too easily perceived as a lack of care or concern, when in my experience it is often because I’m wrestling in the complexities or am so focused on other issues. I can still work toward

justice and faithfulness even though people may not hear me or see me.

It was interesting to talk about the “We will need to be discerning” section—it seems like people wanted you to unpack more about engaging strangers. The first lines frame “interacting with others,” hospitality, and unhurried conversation... but the focus of that section shifts quickly to politics and honoring those in authority.

We would’ve loved to have more direction or thoughts on engaging neighbors, coworkers, and others woven into our daily lives. Hospitality and unhurried conversation are very applicable there too.

“Be of good courage” is a helpful phrase and blessing. It is critical in faithfulness. It brings to mind “Take heart,” “Stand fast” and various other exhortations in the Bible. Thanks for your time, energy, and expression in your writing. Be encouraged that God uses it for his purposes and ways, and we’ve benefitted from it.

Aaron Sands
Nashville, Tennessee

Denis Haack responds:

It’s such a delight to get feedback like this, Aaron, and to know that what I am writing is helping people think through and discuss things. Thank you.

It would have been good to say more about engaging strangers in ordinary ways. Perhaps I should have. I decided not to since we have covered that in previous articles (posted on our website) and this essay was focused in political uncertainty. Your comments remind me that discussing an essay shouldn’t assume people have read previous pieces. I need to keep that in mind as I write in the future.

It is interesting to me that another reader tore out page 11 of that essay and returned

it to me. She had highlighted several of Evan McMullin’s tweets that I had reproduced. I had gone on to say, “Depending on your political and theological convictions, you will doubtlessly agree with some of McMullin’s suggestions and disagree with others.” She had written across the top of the page: “I am disgusted with you people. We finally at least have a pro-life president surrounded with praying godly people. Cancel my subscription!”

Assuming her description of the Trump administration is accurate, I was saddened over her apparent inability to listen to and thoughtfully reflect on opposing points of view. Civility requires it and Christian love demands it.

To the editor:
Denis:

Great job as usual [*Critique* 2017:3]. A couple of random reflections.

1. The literary genres—first analyzed in Aristotle’s *Poetics* as lyric (“dithyrambic”), tragedy, epic, and comedy—are more than mere names and descriptions. Rather they are both the repressed mythic memory of redemptive history and the internalized habitus of the heart revealed in poetic form. They are a “genetic imprint,” an “ontological pattern,” a “psychic terrain,” a “fundamental orientation toward reality.” Christopher Booker suggests that there are seven basic plots to the stories we tell. He writes:

The more familiar we become with the nature of these shaping forms and forces lying beneath the surface of stories, pushing them into patterns and directions which are beyond the storyteller’s conscious control, the more we find that we are entering a realm to which recognition of the plots

themselves proves only to have been a gateway. We are in fact uncovering nothing less than a kind of hidden, universal language.

This “hidden, universal language” is the suppressed memory of the biblical narrative expressed in mankind’s potential and longing for love, our encounters with suffering and an unspecified dread of cosmic undoing, our call to sacrificial striving, and our hope for the restoration of love in community. William Faulkner captures this sense of internalized memory in this poignant statement from his novel, *Light in August*: “Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders.” Here one gets a unique glimpse of the soul’s depth in and through the literary genres. Louise Cowan writes,

For the genres are not external structures governed by rules and conventions but internal forms, perspectives upon life that indicate the kind of response called for by a general work. Not to know their nature is like being deaf to the tone of voice in which a comment is spoken and blind to the face and gesture that expresses it. To be oblivious to the large generic metaphor governing the climate of a work and hence the very atmosphere in which its characters live and breathe is to remain unaware of its deepest meaning and hence its power.... In a sense a knowledge of genre might be thought of as a guide to the laws of the land, if one is willing to grant the existence of a territory of the imagination.

The *mundus imaginalis* is not a replica

of daily existence but a distinctive patterning of the soul. It is the mythic fusion of the world that was and is and will be. It’s a sacramental world where one finds, to quote Coleridge, “the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal.”

Cowan describes the distinctive perspectives of the four genres in words that make clear its biblical parallels.

The lyric realm is the place of origins and sources, the land of heart’s desire, symbolized by the garden. Tragedy, marked by the sudden catastrophe of the loss of a garden state, takes place most often in a palace or a great dynastic house. Comedy endures and perseveres in a fallen world, occurring in the city streets or drawing rooms, escaping sometimes to a world of fantasy, making its way by mutual helpfulness toward a community of love within the larger order of society. Epic, though taking place in some sort of natural surrounding, struggles to build or cleanse or govern this large order, the just city. Hence the epic goal, as it presses to complete the circle, is no longer Eden, but the New Jerusalem, the major human enterprise redeemed and made new.

If the gospel is true, then one would expect to find it everywhere including in the ways we structure meaning through storytelling: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration = lyric, tragedy, epic, and comedy. It begins in a garden and ends in a city, in a love story that ends in a marriage feast.

2. Scott Derrickson is a Christian and a Biola University grad. In the comic

book world, DC had mythic worlds and flat (1950ish) characters (Captain America), whereas the Marvel world was a technologically flat world with complex messy characters. He blended the two, adding the mythic to the morally complex. Great quotes in your article from Derrickson. With the success of this film, he will be given the reins on many more important projects. Keep an eye on him as he really gets it.

3. Regarding Bible reading, can we not also read the Bible as a portal to a larger reality rather than a depository of doctrine. That is, can we also read it with the right brain. Schaeffer hated this aspect of Barth, “encountering Christ in the reading of Scripture,” but there is something to it.

Keep up the good work. My blog yesterday was on how Comic-Con is the platform for mythic searching today as you explore in your good articles on Neil Gaiman (www.nnconversations.com). We need to learn to embrace the modern Druids (storytelling cultural creatives) and their neo-paganism as a vital mission field for the gospel. It is not the Benedict option that we need, but the Patrick option.

Together in mission,
John Seel
Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania

Denis Haack responds:

Thanks, John, for your thoughtful e-mail. You are wise to remind us that truth is far more widely expansive and far more deeply embedded in human reality than we can possibly imagine.

POETRY

WASP

a flagging wasp,
compromised due to accidental indoor entrapment,
flew up her shorts.
she didn't feel it just then, dancing about the porch,
the wasp likely clinging to her swinging jersey knit.
it wasn't until a few minutes later
in the dining room,
still romping with late day energy,
that she sensed the small alien's location
and quickly batted at her thighs,
hollering full mouthed sobs of horror
at the sight of the assailant
and the thought of what might of been.
nothing was, by the way,
to be,
for as I've just explained
the bug was beat,
and no fuel remained for flight or sting.
as it was, he fell beneath the breakfast bench
with what I imagine to be a microscopic thud,
and listlessly awaited his finish by flipflop
or rolled up recycling.
it was the former.
the girl could not be calmed for some time,
plagued by the remembrance of his tiny feet
and the minuscule gust of his cellophane wings
near her knees.
alas, for turmoil endured:
homework could not be attempted
and the clean up of day's amusement, quite impossible.
vows of morning courage were swiftly pledged.
quick too was I to comfort and agree to terms,
though quietly bewildered at her panic
and resulting disability.
I searched for empathy, but found less than total.
it wasn't, after all, a spider.



Copyright © 2017 Emily Awes Anderson



Emily Awes Anderson is a poet, wife, and mom from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her love of writing is life-long, and she hopes this given gladness can serve God's goodness and glory. Her joys include her crazy kids, heroic husband, and weather best suited for jeans and a sweater but no jacket. Her poetry and other writings on scripture, God's blessings, his timing, and the day-by-day of this beautiful, difficult, funny, imperfect life can be found on her blog, *Silver Pennies: Brief Writings on Riches* at emily.awes@gmail.com.



COFFEE

Tilting the glass pot, angling the spout,
pouring out a pure, dark-amber liquid,
a cataract arcing and glistening
with flowing lines of light
steaming into a glossy brown mug.
A thin stream of cream is added,
pure in its snowy-whiteness,
lightening the coffees color.
Carefully tearing then tipping a packet
sends sugar whispering and raising an island
that slowly, swiftly sinks.
The spoon clinks as it stirs,
forming a whirlpool within its wealth.
Fingers curl around the handle,
their nimble flesh grasping it firmly,
relishing its heat.
Raising the heft of the cup, lifting it to the lips,
holding it there for several moments—
breathing in the aroma of its warm mist—
before taking in a sip and savoring
its richness...

Copyright © 2017 Scott Schuleit



*Scott Schuleit is the
associate pastor at Taft
Street Baptist Church. He
enjoys preaching, the arts,
theology, good conversation,
and spending time with his
dear wife Christina.*

When to Argue...or Not



Sometimes I swear it feels like everyone has become the worst sort of fundamentalist: quick to argue, slow to listen—no, unable to listen—eager to belittle, loud, insistent they are right, convinced that their enemies are advancing the apocalypse and mystified you can't see it because it's so obvious it's about to hit you in the head. What, exactly, is wrong with you, anyway? It's not rocket science, you know. So someone says something and we say something, and it's off, an argument, a debate, pro and con, although everyone knows no one is going to change anyone's mind about anything anytime soon, even if they are argued to a standstill.

We've all been drawn into debates we regret. Perhaps because the topic is one we feel strongly about, but which we couldn't at that exact moment support with cogent, compelling arguments, and so we got pummeled by idiot bullet points. Perhaps because the argument spiraled out of hand and, try as we might, we couldn't keep things on track and civil. Perhaps because we got out of hand and saw it happening, but really, it's easy to lose it with idiots.

Some statements and ideas always evoke a strong response in me. I may not say anything, but I'm pretty sure that if I were wearing a fit watch it would light up. And maybe blink. Or melt. Those are times when it is impossible for me to remain silent and equally impossible for me to say anything much that is remotely constructive or compassionate.

It is always sad to me that so few people intentionally seek the best arguments for views they oppose. No wonder we talk past each other. It is especially distressing when Christians are guilty of this. We should be the most

fearless searchers for truth imaginable, always willing to face the strongest arguments against what we believe, the most relentless in refusing to construct straw arguments in order to win a debate. We do not need to be fearful or hesitant because we serve the one who is the Truth, capital T. We can even say, "I don't know," and smile through the jeering because we know that knowing-on-the-spot, though intensely satisfying, isn't the final measure of being on the side of truth. So we can wait, and learn, and figure it out, and be glad that salvation isn't based on winning arguments or knowing all the answers.

And sometimes we remain silent, trying to listen and understand, and then afterwards see our silence not as prudence but cowardice. Aren't some statements, some ideas, simply so wrong, so wicked that they need some response, even if it's a poor one? It's fine to debate immigration policy, but it's never fine to belittle refugees and undocumented workers as racially inferior. So afterwards—it's always afterwards—the stain of our silence quietly haunts. We think of things we could have said, killer arguments, clever comebacks.... Oh, to be able to do it over.

So, when should we speak and respond, debate and argue, and when should we refrain and be silent? It might help if we try to discern some answers to that before the need to decide arises. ■

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Discerning Christians will want to root their thinking in the truth of God's word, and it's not surprising that the wisdom literature of the scriptures speak with some eloquence to these questions. What follows are proverbs, remember, not commands or promises, written for gaining wisdom, which means we need to analyze, interpret and apply them appropriately. Here are a few to begin your biblical study:

Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent. (11:12)

Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge. (14:7)

A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool. (17:10)

The discerning sets his face toward wisdom, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth. (17:24)

Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent. (17:28)

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion. (18:2)

It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling. (20:3)

Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the good sense of your words. (23:9)

Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. (26:4-5)

Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him. (26:12)

If a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet. (29:9)

A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back. (29:11)

Which of these proverbs are convicting to you? Which are puzzling, and why might that be part of real wisdom? Which are the most difficult for you to adopt as a habit of the heart? Why? Taken together, what do they suggest will be true of the truly wise

person in argumentative situations?

2. What other scriptures would be worth bringing into this discussion? You might include, among others, Esther 4:14; Isaiah 62:1; Matthew 26:63; Romans 14:1; James 1:26; 3:1-18; 1 Peter 4:13-17.
3. Who we are talking with can be significant in determining our level of responsibility in the conversation. It can be helpful to think about the people in our life as falling into a series of concentric circles with each widening circle bringing less responsibility to correct every instance of falsehood and misguided ethics. Who would be in each of your circles? Why?
4. What topics, opinions, or positions are so important that any expression of them always requires a response? Why?
5. What topics or ideas always evoke a strong response in you? Why is that so?
6. Is it ever better to lose an argument than to win it? Is there a difference between an argument, a debate and a heated discussion? Does it matter?
7. Heather Gerken, dean of the Yale Law School, wrote a wonderful op-ed piece in *Time* magazine (July 13, 2017), "Campus Free Speech is Not Up for Debate." She argues there is a reason why law schools have not seen the protests against unpopular speakers that have erupted on so many college campuses:

There may be a reason why law students haven't resorted to the extreme tactics we've seen on college campuses: their training. Law school conditions you to know the difference between righteousness and self-righteousness. That's why lawyers know how to go to war without turning the other side into an enemy. People love to tell lawyer jokes, but maybe it's time for the rest of the country to take a lesson from the profession they love to hate.

In law schools we don't just teach our students to know the weaknesses in their own arguments. We demand that they imaginatively and sympathetically reconstruct the best argument on the other side.

From the first day in class, students must defend an argument they don't believe or pretend to be a judge whose values they dislike. Every professor I know assigns cases that vindicate the side she favors-- then brutally dismantles their reasoning. Lawyers learn to see the world as their opponents do, and nothing is more humbling than that...

Make no mistake, we are in the midst of a war over values. We should fight, and fight hard, for what we believe. But even as we do battle, it's crucial to recognize the best in the other side and the worst in your own. [Source: <http://time.com/4856225/law-school-free-speech>]

What might we learn from law school training? Why should this be characteristic of believers in a pluralistic culture hostile to Christian faith? Why is often not characteristic of Christians in the public square? What plans should you make?

8. When is it always best to remain silent, listen and if we speak to limit it to asking questions?
9. To what extent is the question of being silent or entering an argument or debate an issue for Christians within the church?
10. What topics or issues keep coming up in the places you frequent, whether your church, neighborhood, workplace, coffee shop, fitness center, family gatherings, or wherever? How many of them have you carefully researched and thought through? Have you found creative ways to help those who disagree with you to reconsider their positions?
11. What interpersonal techniques do you use to try to reduce hostility and lower tension when friendly arguments get so lively as to become less friendly?

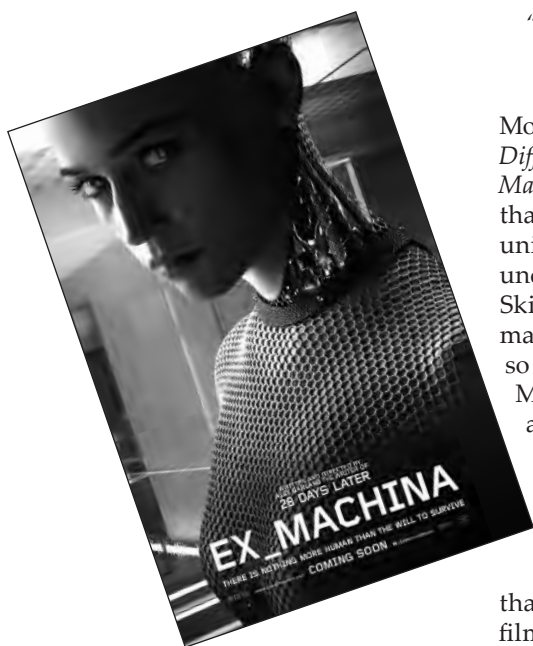
For further reading:

Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion by Os Guinness (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015). You can find my review on Ransom's website.

"Discernment 102: How To Disagree Agreeably" available on Ransom's website.

The Real Test

by R. Greg Grooms



*"To be or not to be—that is the question."
[Hamlet, Act III, Scene 1]*

Things were changing when Mortimer Adler published his *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes* in 1966. The centuries-old belief that there is something unique and universal about being human was under attack. To determinists like B. F. Skinner, being human was simply a matter of biology, something that isn't so unique after all. Post-moderns like Michel Foucault saw human nature as an ever-changing picture painted by social forces, especially language.

The shifting philosophical sands between Adler, Skinner, and Foucault proved to be fertile ground for the arts. In the decades that followed Adler's book, lots of films nibbled away at his argument. For example, *2001: A Space Odyssey* wondered aloud if computers could be intelligent, too. Built upon an assumption of naturalism, its logic was unassailable: mechanical forces produce intelligence in us, ergo they can do so in machines. To illustrate this, 2001 gave us HAL, a computer that was not only intelligent but psychotic, too.

Ex Machina's Ava (Alicia Vikander) is the answer to a very different question.

But before we meet her, director Alex Garland introduces us to Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson). Think of him as Everyman of the Computer Age. We meet him in a cubicle, working on a computer as a software engineer in the world's largest Internet company.

His isn't the most exciting life in the world, but as we meet him he gets exciting news: he's won the company lottery and first prize is a week with the company's reclusive head, founder, and resident genius, Nathan (Oscar Isaac), in his remote fastness in Norway. Before he/we know it, he's whisked away by helicopter and introduced to Nathan, who explains why he's there.

It's simple: Nathan has invented artificial intelligence and Caleb is to be its Turing test. Named after Alan Turing (of *The Imitation Game*), the test is designed to determine if a computer is intelligent. From the start Nathan goes out of his way to tickle Caleb's ego. It seems he wasn't randomly selected after all.

Caleb: Why me?

Nathan: I needed someone that would ask the right questions, so I did a search and I found the most talented coder in my company. You know, instead of seeing this as a deception, you should see it as proof.

Caleb: Proof of what?

Nathan: Come on, Caleb. You don't think I don't know what it's like to be smart? Smarter than everyone else.

Jockeying for position. You got the light on you, man. Not lucky. Chosen.

Then he introduces him to Ava. Three things are evident about her. First, she is a machine. Her face, hands, and feet

look human down to the very skin that covers them, but her mechanical arms and legs are transparent. We not only see her gears and wires, we hear them faintly when she moves. Second, she is

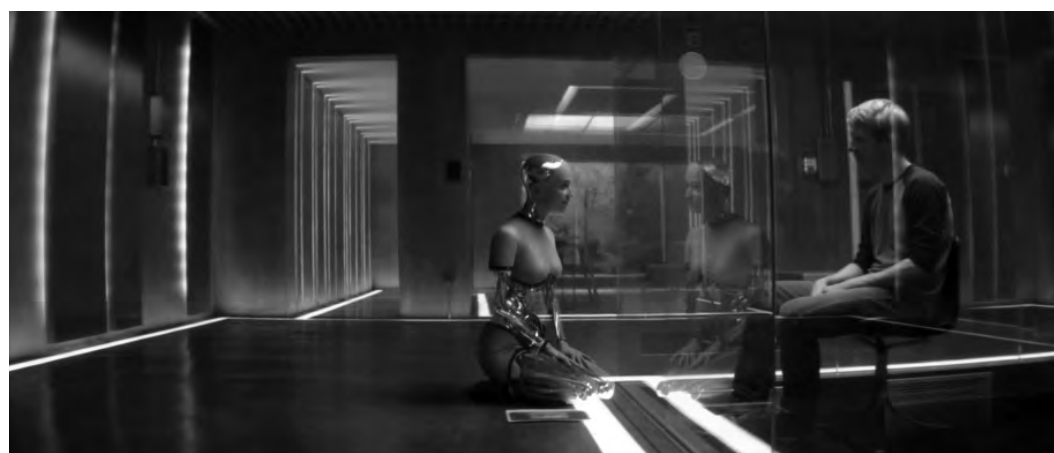
**AVA: ISN'T IT STRANGE, TO
CREATE SOMETHING THAT
HATES YOU?**

undoubtedly intelligent, even more so than Caleb. Third, she is very beautiful. When Caleb asks Nathan why he made her so, he offers this explanation: we have no experience of personality that is not gender-based, so creating artificial intelligence that is neither male nor female is just too hard. Caleb's counter suggestion proves to be more to the point. Is she beautiful, he wonders, for the same reason the magician's assistant is beautiful, i.e., to distract the audience from what is really going on?

What's really going on becomes clear only slowly. From the start, Caleb and Ava are only allowed to interact through a glass wall, never truly face to face. We learn that Ava is a prisoner, locked in and perpetually under surveillance. So too, Caleb finds, is he. His comings and goings are carefully restricted by Nathan's high-tech security system. What at first looks merely awkward soon becomes sinister, when Ava warns Caleb that all is not as it seems and Nathan is not to be trusted.

As we get to know Nathan, he certainly feels less than trustworthy. He's easy not to like, not to trust. He's brilliant to be sure, but also arrogant, crass, unashamedly self-centered, and inclined to drink too much. His conversations with Caleb range over a wide variety of fascinating subjects: God, creation, love, sex, etc., but his comments never rise above the level of a junior high boy in a locker room. He's abusive to Kyoko, an earlier, less-advanced model of Ava. And dear, sweet, beautiful Ava is everything Nathan isn't. So, when she suggests escape to Caleb, he willingly assists her in concocting a plan.

All comes to a head the night before Caleb's scheduled departure. At their farewell dinner, Nathan gets a little





drunk and tells Caleb what's really been going on: Ava isn't the test subject. He is. Her challenge isn't to persuade him that she's intelligent, it's to gain his trust, deceive him, and use him to escape, for this in Nathan's opinion is the true test: a real self is one that can be selfish, can use others for its own ends.

Ex Machina's conclusion is predictably violent. Let me warn you of it and leave it to your imagination.

It's tempting to see this fable as a fulfillment of Stephen Hawking's prophecy to the BBC in December of 2014: "The development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race." He fears the Terminator series run amok. If machines become smarter and more powerful than us, we're doomed to lose Darwin's survival of the fittest game. But seeing Garland's film in that light, I think, would be foolish and self-serving, for as he made clear in an NPR interview in April of 2015, the problem he's warning us of isn't Ava, it's us: "The tension in this film is much more directed at the humans."

I'm reminded of the words of Lewis' Screwtape here:

The whole philosophy of Hell rests on recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specially, that one self is not another self. My good is my good and your good is yours. What one gains another loses. Even an inanimate object is what it is by excluding all other objects from the space it occupies; if it expands, it does so by thrusting other objects aside or by absorbing them. A self does the same. With beasts the absorption takes the form of eating; for us, it means the sucking of will and freedom out of a weaker self into a stronger. "To be" means "to be in competition."

I heartily recommend *Ex Machina* to you. ■

Copyright © 2017 R. Greg Grooms



R. Greg Grooms lives with his wife Mary Jane in Hill House, a large home across the street from the University of Texas in Austin, where they regularly

welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What are your first impressions of this film?
2. Did you enjoy the film? One reviewer dismissed it as "three people in a room talking." How might you respond to his comment?
3. Describe Caleb. What do you like/dislike about him? Ditto Nathan and Ava.
4. How do your feelings about these three characters change as the film progresses?
5. How does Alex Garland use sexual imagery in this film? Does it titillate you or repel you? Why?
6. Respond to Garland's comment, "The tension in this film is more directed at the humans." How would you describe the tension? Where do you feel it?
7. Might you venture an opinion on how Alex Garland might answer Mortimer Adler's question, i.e., what is the difference in man and what difference does it make? How might you answer the question?
8. If you had Alex Garland with you after watching his film, what questions would you have for him?

The Recovery of Classical Greek Thinking

There were certain ancient schools of thought, particularly Stoicism and Epicureanism, which could not be fully embraced without abandoning some fundamental Christian principles. Again, this is not to say that every Renaissance humanist who delved into Stoic and Epicurean texts necessarily turned into a skeptic and atheist. John Calvin immersed himself in Stoicism, and Thomas More in Epicureanism. But not everyone reacted to these ancient traditions as did Calvin and More, who embraced what was compatible with Christianity and rejected what was not. Some intellectuals accepted these ancient philosophies with varying degrees of enthusiasm, even to the point of accepting propositions that were incompatible with Christian faith. Given that no one in the sixteenth century could abjure their Christian faith publicly and survive, all who gravitated toward these ancient non-Christian worldviews had to do so as stealthily as possible, and as a result this sort of neo-paganism tended to be subtle rather than overt. But the subtlety of its adherents—among whom there was no uniformity or cohesive agenda—did not lessen their eventual impact on Western culture.

A case in point is that of a single Epicurean text recovered in the fifteenth century: "On the Nature of Things," a poem by Lucretius, written in the first century, about two generations before the birth of Christ. This text, which had been lost for nearly a millennium, was discovered in a remote monastery and set into circulation by the humanist Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459). Until then, Lucretius had been known only through descriptions by other ancient writers. In the Christian tradition, he had been dismissed by St. Jerome in the fifth century as a bad poet who had killed himself after being driven insane by a love potion. Once he was brought to light again, however, Lucretius proved Jerome wrong. Those who

read him, first in manuscripts and eventually in print, could not help but notice that Lucretius was far from mad, and that he had a lucid and rational understanding of reality that was radically different from that of Christianity, and utterly incompatible with it:

Everything is made of tiny invisible particles (atoms) that are immutable and indivisible.

These elementary particles are eternal and infinite in number.

The particles are in constant motion in an infinite void.

The universe has no creator or designer, no beginning or end, or purpose.

Everything comes into being by random chance, from the motion of these atoms.

Nature is an endless process of trial and error, and a battle for survival.

Humans are far from unique and as inconsequential as anything else that exists.

The soul is material and dies with the body; therefore, there is no afterlife.

All religions are delusions, mere superstitious projections of our fears and desires.

All religions are cruel and a source of anxiety.

Immaterial spirits do not exist: there are no angels, demons, genii, nymphs, or ghosts.

The highest goal of life is to enhance pleasure and avoid pain.

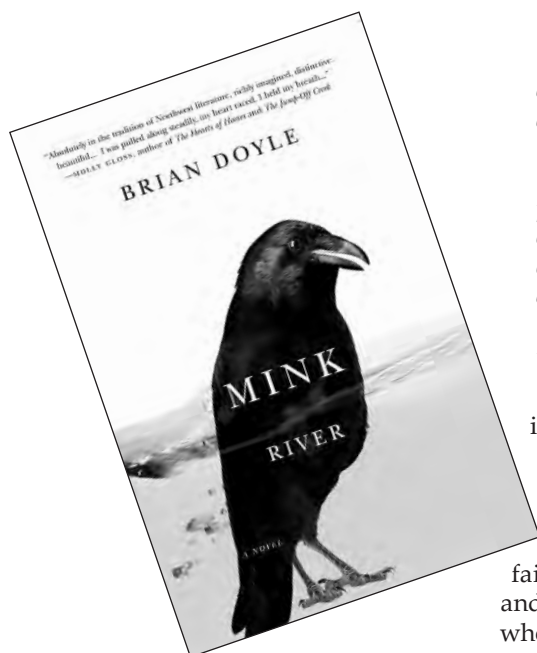
Delusion is the worst of all obstacles to pleasure, greater even than pain.

In some ways, this materialistic atheism resembled that of the unscholarly valentones ["tough ones"] later executed by the Spanish Inquisition, but it was more systematically expressed, with greater attention to detail and cogency. Unlike the valentones, whose unbelief tended to be

inchoate and beyond analysis, Lucretius had a well-developed epistemology that resembled that of modern empirical science and had a curiously religious quality to it, as does the "new atheism" of the early twenty-first century—that very same ethos that led the ancient followers of Epicurus to call him a savior (soter). As Lucretius saw it, disciplined observation and the use of reason could lead to a thorough understanding of everything in the universe, and the information gathered by the senses always trumped all other claims to authority, no matter how venerable or muscular. ■

Excerpted from "The Age of Reasonable Doubt" in *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650* by Carlos M. N. Eire (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 2016) pp. 664–666.

An Extraordinary Ordinary



Neawanaka is a tiny village on the Oregon coast, a place where people have lived longer than the stories tell, on the spot where the Mink River flows into the Pacific Ocean. The fictional setting for Brian Doyle's superb novel, *Mink River*, Neawanaka has mostly skipped the advance of modernity because it is out of the way and rather disinterested, and so is a place where people, hopeful but broken and troubled, can find meaningful community. It receives about 200 inches of rain annually, is blessed with abundant natural beauty and plenty of fish, and is populated by people who trace their lineage back in stories not just decades but centuries. The village is very small and by all measures insignificant, forgettable even, unless you listen to the stories and sit with the people who tell them. Doyle allows us to do that and, as we do, hints of something more begin to appear.

Sometimes something changes you forever and often it's the smallest thing,

a thing you wouldn't think would be able to carry such momentous weight, but it's like playground teeter-totters, those exquisitely balanced splintery pine planks with a laughing or screaming child at each end, where the slightest change in weight to one end tips everything all the way; and what tipped the doctor into a new life just happened a minute ago. [p. 269]

Margie bought *Mink River* and read it first. She had noticed essays by Doyle in *The Sun*, a literary magazine for which we have long had a subscription. She loved his gentle humor, his unabashed Catholic faith, the art with which he tells stories, and his way with words. She grieved when he died in May 2017 from a brain tumor at the age of 60. Often when we have guests she takes Doyle's *A Book of Uncommon Prayer* down from the shelf and reads aloud. Its subtitle, *100 Celebrations of the Miracle and Muddle of the Ordinary*, suggests why we are drawn to it. Margie wasn't sure what she thought of *Mink River* when she gave it to me. I hadn't read 20 pages before laughing aloud twice, and knew I was hooked. Near the end I read more slowly because I didn't want it to end. It's a novel to read and cherish and read again.

Doyle divides his prose into little sections so that, once we have met the residents of Mink River, we can follow the unfolding of their days without losing track of any of them. It is like having a God's-eye perspective on the town and its inhabitants, for good and for ill.

Dawn. A pregnant green moist silence everywhere; and then the robins start, and the starlings, and the jays, and the juncos, and the barred owl closing up shop for the night, and a hound howling

in the hills, which starts a couple other dogs going, which sets a guy to shouting at the dogs to shut up for chrissake, and someone tries to get a recalcitrant truck going, and the truck just can't get going, it gasps and gasps and gasps, which sets the owl going again, which sets the mice and shrews and squirrels nearby to chittering, which worries the jays and robins, everyone has the owl shivers, and then the truck finally starts but then immediately dies, which sets the driver to cursing steadily feck feck feck which sets his passenger to giggling and the passenger's giggle is so infectious that the driver can't help but laugh either, so they sit there laughing, which sets two crows laughing, which sets the hound to howling in the hills again; and then another car across town starts and a church bell booms brazenly and a house alarm shrills and three garage doors groan up at once and a gray whale moans offshore and there are a thousand thousand other sounds too small or high to hear, the eyelids of a thrush chick opening, the petals of redwood sorrel opening, morning glory flowers opening, refrigerators opening, smiles beginning, groans beginning, prayers launching, boats launching, a long green whisper of sunlight sinking down down down into the sea and touching the motionless perch who hear in their dreams the slide of tide like breathing, like a caress, like a waltz. [p. 223]

The intertwining of relationships and community and nature and events, the weaknesses and strengths of individuals, the quirks and habits that endear and annoy—we come to see them all and love them because these characters, though fictional, are so very real.

We meet Worried Man, an old man who tells the old stories and thereby

brings meaning and a sense of identity to all who listen. We meet the doctor, a kindly man who cares for the sick in spare bedrooms and smokes only 12 cigarettes a day, each one at a set hour named after one of the Lord's apostles whose names and stories he reviews thoughtfully as he enjoys his smoke. And there is Moses, a crow rescued from the mud by the old nun and taught to talk by her. There is a man who beats his son, Michael the town cop, and his wife Sara who is pregnant with their third daughter. We meet Cedar, who was pulled out of the Mink by Worried Man, mostly drowned, who can't remember his past but is a faithful and good friend, and hard worker. There is Declan who fishes, and his sister Grace who is lost and angry about it but doesn't want your help. We meet No Horses, and Owen, and Maple Head, and Nora, and more—all worth meeting and knowing, and you'll be better for having done so.

The talking crow should be a signal that this is an enchanted world. Faith is so real that the line between natural and spiritual is simply erased, as it should be. Worried Man can sense pain and fear, rather like an aroma wafting on a breeze, and having tasted it, tracks down the source to bring relief and comfort and presence. Moses, the talking crow, talks, and if that sounds weird you haven't met Moses. But you should. This is a novel that doesn't merely entertain; it changes how we see people and reality and all the ordinary things that we dismiss as merely ordinary. And it does all this because Doyle, steeped in scripture and myth, knows with open hearted love the power of story to enlighten, name, transform and clarify.

Moses, sitting on the football helmet at

Other Repair, issues a speech as Owen planes planks. Human people, says Moses, think that stories have beginnings and middles and ends, but we crow people know that stories just wander on and on and change form and are reborn again and again. That is who they are. Stories are not only words, you know. Words are just the clothes that people drape on stories. When crows tell stories, stories tell us, do you know what I mean? That's just how it is with crow people. We have been playing with stories for a very long time. There are a lot of stories that haven't been told yet, did you know that? And some stories get lost and don't get told again for thousands of years. You find them sometimes all lonely. That's why we have wings, you know. To go find stories. [p. 315]

Doyle breaks rules in *Mink River*, rules that lit teachers insist should never be broken. He composes such long sentences that some go on for pages, though they flow so naturally I never noticed until I stopped and looked. He loves lists and includes them because lists let us see what the ordinary is about, and in reading them we come to know the people, their lives, interests, and concerns more clearly. And without writing a single sentence of science fiction, Doyle assumes, correctly, that the ordinary, seen correctly, exists on the edge of a greater reality, full of mystery and wonder and faith and love and enchantment, though now broken and gasping for healing. I entered the world of *Mink River* and didn't want to leave, but had to, and when I reentered my own world everything was just a bit richer than I had known. ■

Resource recommended: *Mink River* by Brian Doyle (Corvallis, OR; Oregon State University Press; 2010) 319 pages..

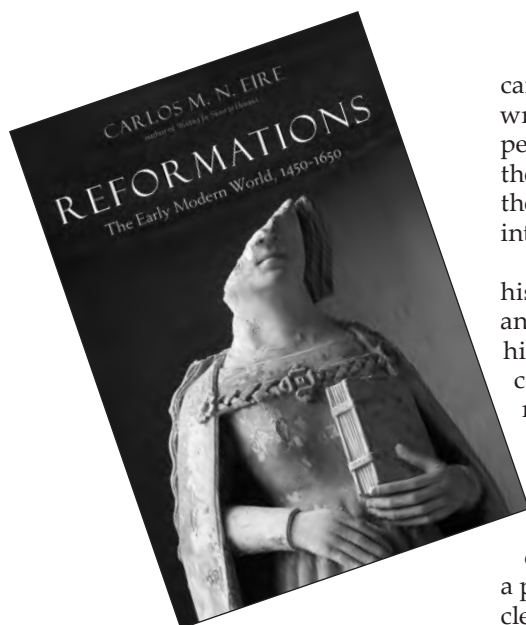
RESOURCE

Hearts and Minds bookstore is a well-stocked haven for serious, reflective readers. When ordering resources, mention Ransom Fellowship and they will contribute 10 per cent of the total back to us. ■

Resource: *Hearts and Minds bookstore, www.heartsandmindsbooks.com*



A Necessary, Perilous Venture



I ordered Carlos Fire's new book because I am entranced with his earlier one, *Waiting for Snow in Havana* (2003). Still, *Waiting for Snow* is a memoir and this new one is a history. And the first is of modest length (387 pages) while the new one is of...well...I don't want to use the word immodest but, including notes and such, it tops out at 893 pages. Still, I trusted Fire to write lively, compelling prose and so I assumed the length would not matter. His new book is *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650*, and I recommend it to you. Hugely. And no, it is not too long.

The reason for the "s" at the end of *Reformations* is that although Protestants are keen to say there was one movement of reform—the Protestant Reformation—Fire argues there were actually numerous movements to reform the church in the sixteenth century. This is Fire's area of scholarly expertise—he teaches history and religious studies at Yale—and if he lectures like he writes his classes must be wonderful. Though

carefully researched, *Reformations* is written not for scholars but for ordinary people who want to understand how the efforts to reform the church lurches the Western world from the medieval into the modern era.

Fire is one of those rare, gifted historians—like Doris Kearns Goodwin and Ron Chernow—whose books of history read as effortlessly as a well-crafted novel. If you doubt that, you must have not read *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* by Goodwin and *Alexander Hamilton* by Chernow—please do so.

Captivating prose, richly textured descriptions, lively, well told stories, a passionate commitment to truth, and clear explanations free of technical jargon animate *Reformations* throughout, and kept me not just reading, but fascinated. No, it is not too long; when I reached the final page I wished for more.

As the book's subtitle says, *Reformations* tells the story of two centuries—1450–1650—so readers can see what led up to the great spasm of reform with the birth of Protestantism and what flowed out as a result. The process of reform was not purely a religious exercise involving theological debate about doctrine and ecclesiastical practice between professors and clerics. It involved that, certainly, but in medieval Europe there was no sharp division between religious commitments on the one hand and political, economic, and social concerns on the other. Fire allows us a glimpse of medieval piety, church teaching and preaching, scholarly discussions, and the social, political, economic, and religious concerns that ordinary Christians experienced in the years leading up to Luther's nailing his "95 Theses" to the church door in Wittenberg. Corruption was rife in

the church and in society, reform was needed, but that was such common knowledge that few disputed it. What no one anticipated was that the effort to reform the church would be so unsettling, or that it would set in motion forces that would transform the Western world from a culture of religious belief to one of secular disbelief.

And it is true that the sixteenth century not only launched Protestantism but also loosed a deadly flood of skepticism that still characterizes our world. I know of no other description of this historical process that is told with such compelling clarity as Fire provides here. This alone is worth the price—and the length—of the book. I am convinced the Protestant Reformation was necessary, but it was a perilous affair, and its unfolding included numerous unfortunate choices, made with the best of intentions but that still yielded very tragic consequences.

The slide from the fragmentation of the church into greater and greater skepticism was partly a matter of ideas. The Protestant reformers argued that the Bible, not the church, was the final authority. Yet these same reformers could not agree on what the Bible taught on doctrines as important as the meaning of baptism and the Eucharist, the two central sacraments of the church. And this disagreement was a very public one, waged in ways that everyone could see, resulting in very public church splits, vigorous expressions of condemnation, and as political powers got involved, violence. Serious thinkers in society wondered why, if the church was corrupt and the Bible was unclear, either could be trusted as final authorities on truth and goodness. Should we not instead begin afresh, doubt everything claimed

by every authority, and use reason and careful experimentation to discover truth free of religious dogma? Catholics persecuted Protestants and Protestants returned the favor. Religion, it seemed, could even be dangerous.

Life is messy, and changing ideas led to changes in practice, and sometimes those changes brought unintended consequences. One example Eire explores involves something called *confraternities*. These were volunteer organizations of a charitable, religious nature that were very popular in Catholic Europe and strongly encouraged by the church in the medieval period. Involvement in such groups not only met social needs among the poor and needy but was seen as a way to merit the grace of God for salvation.

When King Philip II of Spain attempted to turn over some of the philanthropic activities of confraternities to civil authorities, and to fund them through taxes instead, the confraternities rose in protest and made him abandon that plan. Their chief complaint was a ringing affirmation of Tridentine Catholic teaching: if works of mercy were to be taken from the hands of the laity and turned over to government officials, and if all voluntary almsgiving were

replaced with mandatory taxes, how were the faithful to earn their salvation?" [p. 410]

If you believe the Protestant understanding of salvation as a free gift of grace, you'll guess correctly that the reformers were unenthusiastic about confraternities. But, as Eire explains, suppressing them for good theological reasons opened the door to greater secularization in society.

Confraternities had been around for centuries, and they had played an increasingly important role in religious and civic life in the late Middle Ages. Their functions were as varied as the needs of any community, and as much of an intermingling of material and spiri-

tual concerns as one might expect from a culture that so closely linked the natural and supernatural. Confraternities were deeply involved not just in specific devotions, such as the use of the prayer beads of the rosary, or the adoration of the Eucharist, or the celebration of certain feasts, but also in charitable and philanthropic activities, such as the running of hospitals, almshouses, orphanages, and rehabilitation centers for former prostitutes. Wherever Protestants disbanded confraternities, they did much more than extinguish all sorts of rituals and public celebrations; they also wiped out much of the local charitable infrastructure, which

they then redesigned and placed in the hands of civil authorities, to be funded by compulsory taxes rather than by voluntary acts of charity. [p. 409]

So, more of life was transferred from church to state, from being a religious enterprise to being a civil one, from being a spiritual practice to a secular action. I can understand why this choice was made, but I can also understand why it fueled the doubts of skeptics. Deeply religious people institute a good, necessary social change, and inadvertently religion is seen as less necessary for the health of society than previously thought. It's called the law of unintended consequences.

It is refreshing for me, a Protestant, to read this history by a thoughtful Catholic scholar. I am not suggesting by this that *Reformations* is sectarian or biased, for it is not. Eire is too good a scholar for that. (I assume he would be capable of writing a book on the same period as a Catholic apologist if he desired—and I would eagerly read it. But that is not *Reformations*.) I'm referring to the fact, rather, that he is careful to tell the Catholic side of the story, and in doing so I learned a great deal. There were many who remained in the Roman Church who worked hard and faithfully for reform, even at great cost, and were motivated by a deep love of Christ. It turns out that not only did the Protestants disagree with one another, but not all thoughtful believers eager for reform found their actions and arguments convincing or compelling.

Eire also helpfully corrects some commonly held Protestant assumptions. One example involves the nature and extent of the Spanish Inquisition.

For centuries, thanks largely to sensational Protestant accounts, the

FAITHFUL CATHOLICS WHO WISHED TO REFORM THEIR CHURCH FACED A DAUNTING CHALLENGE, FOR THE PRIVILEGES, POWER, AND WEALTH OF THE CHURCH HIERARCHY WERE IMMENSE, AND INERTIA AND RESISTANCE TO CHANGE WERE ENDEMIC. [p. 114]

Spanish Inquisition had a reputation as a bloodthirsty killing machine, with some estimates assigning tens of thousands of executions to it. Much to everyone's surprise, however, research in the late twentieth century revealed just the opposite to be true, especially of the period that coincides with the so-called confessional age. The figures shocked the scholarly world, turning long-held assumptions on their head:

as it turns out, between 1547 and 1700 the Spanish Inquisition executed 826 people, or only 1.8 percent of the total number processed by its tribunals. Equally surprising, it also burned 778 effigies during that same span of time, which means that almost as many people escaped its clutches as were actually killed by it. Moreover, when the methods of the Inquisition began to be compared to those of secular courts throughout Spain and Europe, scholars were equally surprised to discover that the dreaded Inquisition was far kinder to its prisoners than its secular counterparts. Cases were discovered of prisoners under civil jurisdiction who did everything they could to be transferred to the Inquisition, including blaspheming on purpose, or spouting heretical propositions. If nothing else, these discoveries have shown us that

long-held assumptions should always be questioned. All the same, however, there is no denying that the Spanish Inquisition, despite its newly discovered relative leniency, was a fearsome agent of social disciplining that few in its day would have seen as kind and merciful. [p. 614]

On the other hand, I would say that Eire does not place sufficient emphasis

on the fact that the Protestant reformers were attempting to reclaim a gospel that had been lost by a church that had moved away from scripture. Medieval Catholic theology had elevated penance and the need to merit grace to such an extent that the truth of justification as a free gift of grace, as taught by the apostles

and St. Augustine, had receded into the background. He also seems at times to emphasize the differences between the Protestants more than the core convictions that bound them together.

The turmoil of the sixteenth century forever changed our world. It is a legacy that brings both blessing and curse, which means that we bear a serious responsibility. The church is horribly fragmented, but our Lord emphatically calls his people to unity. "The glory that you have given me," Jesus prayed just before his death, "I have given to them, that they may be one even as we

are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (John 17:22–23). In this we have failed miserably, and are failing, and it is not a little thing. According to our Lord, the world has reason to disbelieve until it is set right. It is not surprising, then, that we live in a culture where skepticism and secularism are advanced beyond anything anyone in the sixteenth century would have imagined possible.

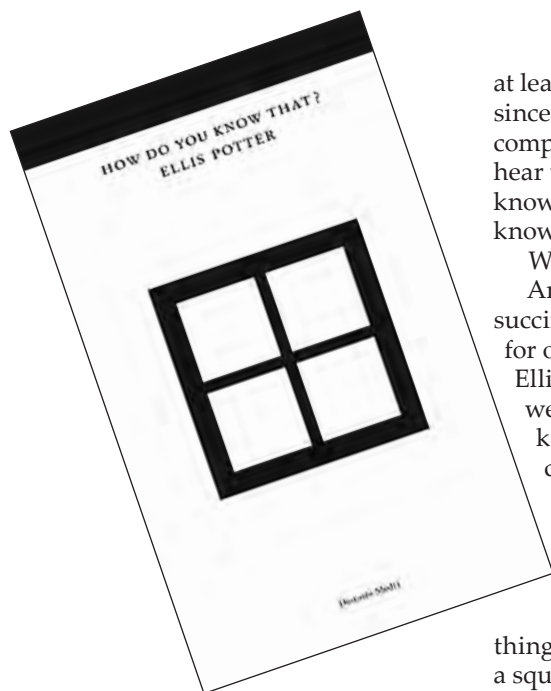
We are in a very different world from the one in which the reformers lived, and yet it seems self-evident that reformation is necessary again. *Reformations* can help us learn from the past in order to be more faithful today, and that is a rich grace. ■

Book recommended: *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650* by Carlos M. N. Eire (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 2016) 757 pages + notes + bibliography + indices.

AS EVERYONE KNOWS, THOSE WHO THINK THEY CAN DO NO WRONG TEND TO BE AMONG THOSE WHO INFLUENCE HISTORY THE MOST. ESPECIALLY IF THEY ALSO HAPPEN TO BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE ON A MISSION FROM GOD. [p. 317]

RESOURCE: *HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT?*

On Believing, Knowing, and Finding



“Epistemology,” Ellis Potter insists, “is not a disease” (p. 9). It is also not something boring we can ignore. It is not, in other words, like geometry. Speaking of geometry, I was in a book discussion recently and someone mentioned Pythagoras’s theorem and I realized with a jolt that this was, as far as I could remember, the first and only time $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ had entered my head since high school and that I still had no idea why it’s so significant or how it’s useful (except on exams).

I digress: my point is that epistemology is practical, helpful, and really quite important, even though the word *epistemology*, which isn’t the point, may seem intimidating. We may not realize it, but it comes up in every conversation about things that matter, and when we say “I know” or “I don’t know” or “I believe” or “I don’t believe” or “I’ll find out” or “What do you think?” or “I think that....” So, thinking about it

at least a bit might be wise. Especially since we don’t know perfectly or completely, and because, when people hear what we say we believe or know, they often ask, “How do you know that?”

Which is a very good question.

And in *How Do You Know That?*, a succinct and thoughtful explanation for ordinary Christians, my friend Ellis Potter helps us understand how we know what we know, and how knowing that helps us have greater clarity, certainty, and humility. It also helps us explain why we believe what we do, and how to help friends examine rival truth claims.

Potter says that we know things through four sources. Imagine a square, he says, and the four sources of knowledge are the four corners:

- Bible (Revelation)
- Rationality
- Institution (Tradition)
- Experience

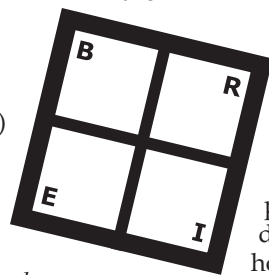
Each of the four corners is a different authority for our knowledge of reality. Each corner is unique, in the sense that it tells us something that the other corners cannot. Each corner is essential, in the sense that we cannot understand God and the whole of reality if we leave any of the corners out of the epistemology.

We need all four corners. We cannot know reality truly if we only have our rationality. We cannot know reality truly if we only have the authority and tradition of the community. We cannot know reality truly if we sit in a room and read a holy book all day. If we have only personal experience, and we see angels

and make prophecies, but don’t have the other corners to complete our understanding of reality, then our personal experience is not enough—and may even be dangerous.

In fact, all of the corners, if isolated, can be dangerous. But that does not mean we can live without them....

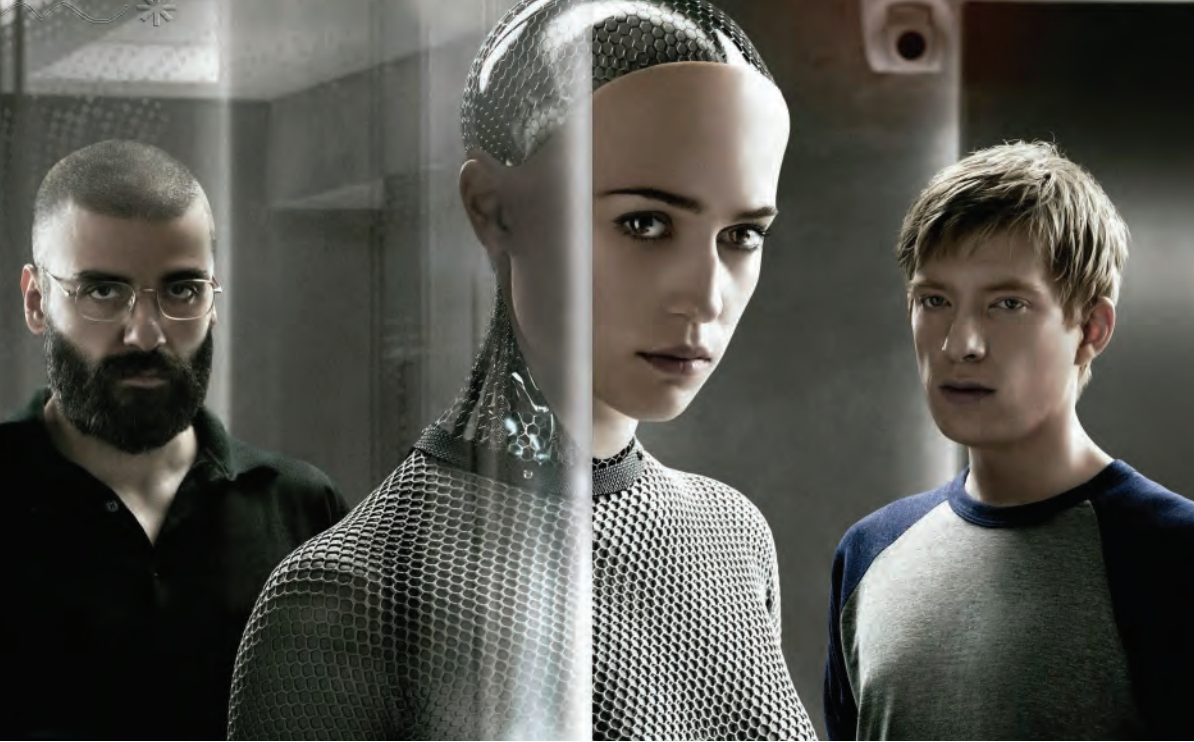
Sometimes people want to know, “Which of the corners is most important? Which one takes precedence over the others?” But the four corners are not a hierarchy. No one is higher than another. They are a complementarity, meaning that all are necessary for understanding reality. There is no one corner that dominates all the others. They are not equal in function, nor are they interchangeable. They are all essential and distinct and unique. None of them are dependent, and none of them is first. They’re all primary and all original. [p. 35-36]



How Do You Know That? is based on a lecture Potter has given numerous times all over the globe to all sorts of groups. It ends with 33 questions that people have raised and that are great starting points for discussion. He also defines the two axes of the square—horizontal and vertical—and I’ll leave that for you to explore as you read.

Potter is gifted in knowing how to speak in helpful ways to the ordinary things of life most of us have barely noticed. *How Do You Know That?* is one such gift, and I recommend you read it, and discuss it with friends. ■

Resource recommended: *How Do You Know That?* by Ellis Potter (Switzerland: Destinée Media; 2016) 88 pages.



Film Credits: *Ex Machina*

Starring:

Domhnall Gleeson (Caleb)
Oscar Isaac (Nathan)
Alicia Vikander (Ava)
Sonoya Mizuno (Kyoko)

Director/Writer: Alex Garland

Producers: Eli Bush, Tessa Ross, Scott Rudin,
and others

Cinematography: Rob Hardy

Runtime: 108 min

Release: 2015 (USA)

Rated R (for graphic nudity, language, sexual
references, and some violence)