Chapter 1:

"Don't Speak Until You're Spoken To"

Introduction: The Stupefying Nature of what is Proposed

I'm going to start with something I hope makes no sense to you at all. My reason for doing this is that I want you to glimpse, as we begin, that whatever we are doing in this course is coming at you out of left field. This is to prevent you from falling back on patterns of understanding that are obvious to you. I don't want you, at least initially, to sense you've "heard it all before". I hope that, thus forewarned, you will be available to sink into what is being proposed for you over the next few chapters.

So here's where I would like to start: with some well-known verses of Scripture, from the beginning of the Epistle to the Hebrews. This is what they say: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; (…)". Well, so far so good. This is a model of communication which I imagine is more or less familiar. A long time ago, someone called God speaks to a bunch of ancestors somewhere in the Middle East, and he does so by inspiring certain prophets—more or less wild, agèd, bearded males, and just conceivably one or two females—to speak in his name. In any case, the notion of some oracular pronouncements coming through certain individuals is not completely alien to us.

The author goes on to say: "but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son". Well, the previous model of communication seems intact, but has been ratcheted up a couple of degrees. Now the degree of authority of the oracle-bearing one has shifted from a mere prophet to a Son. Still, we get the message: what is being claimed is that the most recent communication is somehow of much greater weight than

the previous utterances. This is underlined by what comes next: "whom He appointed the heir of all things". Well, who knows quite what this means? But appointing an heir seems, in principle, something we can cope with: this mega-prophet—who, by being a Son, is somehow more on the inside of things than the other prophets—has turned up and is going to inherit everything.

The author then expands this to say: "through whom also he created the world." Whoa! What on earth could this mean? We've suddenly leapt out of a paradigm of communication with which we could more or less deal. Instead, we've stumbled upon a rogue statement—rather as if someone were having an apparently reasonable discussion with us, but then discreetly disclosed to us that they are, in fact, Napoleon.

Either that, or the whole of the previous picture doesn't do at all: how on earth does someone who appears in the middle of history—and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is in fact talking about the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth—get to be involved in the creation of the world? Something which, if it happened at all, happened a very, very long time before any of this, and scarcely seems to be the sort of thing which happened through a historical person.

It's tempting to imagine God the Father and Jesus standing next to the hot and cold tap in a bath, turning them on together, and Jesus rushing round the side and jumping into the tub when it's half-full. But frankly, this picture sounds mythical; what's more, it sounds silly. Furthermore, it doesn't seem to add anything significant to our knowledge to tell us that this particular bloke, in the middle of history, had also been around at the beginning—other, perhaps, than to aggrandise him. In any case, it's a very weird statement. It suggests this historical person, who lived between fixed dates like the rest of us, was somehow involved in bringing to being everything that is.

Now, I'm not going to try and give you an answer as to what this sentence "really" means at this point. And that's not because I have one tucked away—I wish! What I wanted to do was bring out the weirdness of the act of communication into which I hope to induct you. To show how we are going to have to change our ears and our perceptions if we are going to be able to imagine what might be meant by it.

In fact, the sentence goes on. Even though there is a full stop in the English translation, there is no punctuation in the Greek. So this is a continuation:

> He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.

He better to paraphrase it something like this:

> He, who is the breaking forth of the radiance of God's glory and the visible imprint of God's (in principle invisible) nature and the holder-in-being of everything that is by the constitutive decree of God's power.

The paraphrase makes it even clearer that it is this historical person, Jesus, to whom all these descriptions apply. So our author is not running away, in an embarrassed fashion, from having tipped us the wink that he is Napoleon. He's about as un-closeted a Napoleon as you can imagine: Napoleon on stilts!

So, as I say, I hope that what is being suggested here is not obvious to you. Because I want it to be evident just what an odd starting point we are at. What I hope we will do over these chapters is *begin* to become habituated to being the sort of people who *might* hear God speaking through the Son, whom he appointed over all things. In other words, rather than merely listening to a bloke with a message, we will become aware of someone who is God's very self, involved in the creation of all things, who is speaking. It's going to be a rather different sort of communication than ones we are accustomed to, since it is not merely saying: "Well, there's Creation, everything that is, and Creation somehow has a message for us, like "Help, stop polluting me or using me up". And then there's also a bloke who turns up and, on top of that more general message, gives us some instructions to live by, maybe of a more or less moralistic sort.

No! To judge by what is being said in Hebrews, the Creator of everything that is—who cannot, of Himself (if you'll excuse the sexist pronoun) be heard by us, who is outside everything that is, outside

all our possible forms of comparison—this Creator has entered into a form of communication which is a making-alive of everything that is, towards us—as something personal for us. Creation as everything that is, and Jesus as a historical person, is the same act of communication: God speaking with one voice.

Does that make sense? Not too much, I hope. If so, you've "got it" already, and there's no point you're undergoing this course! Instead, I hope you will sit with the oddness of the verses I've started you with, so we can become accustomed to what an odd form of listening, and what an odd act of communication, it is to which we are being summoned.

From Grasping on to a Soundness of Theory to Relaxing into a Practice

OK. After having dumped you in the theological deep-end and rather discourteously suggested I hope you drown, we can now move on to what I'll be looking at during the rest of this first chapter, which is not strictly theological *at all*. I'm going to be looking at what I call *basic anthropology*. This rather fancy-sounding word means the exploration and study of the origins, the behaviour, and the physical and cultural development of the human animal. I'm not using it here to refer to a study of distant tribes; rather, I'm going to be highlighting certain things about how we function, simply as humans, being the sort of animal we are. These are things which, in fact, you know already. We all know them. Nevertheless, we often ignore them in practice.

So I want to start by asking you to make quite a big effort: suspend the temptation to theology for a bit. We'll get back to theology eventually. For the moment, I want to ask you not to rush in and supply "solutions from God" to anything we talk about. We are going to be talking about basic matters of being human instead. For instance, I want us to think about how we humans manage to tell the truth, be truthful. I want to point out how much we are, all of us, under the spell of what a friend of mine calls "physics envy". This spell suggests to us that what is really truth-bearing in our world is the paradigm bequeathed to us by physics and mathematics, and that anything else is not really up to much in the truth stakes. So there are really true things—those that can be set out

in clear, distinct ideas, like maps, building structures, bridge engineering, and physics. This is hard science. And then there are flaky forms of truthfulness that aren't really very true, like narrative, storytelling and other things of that sort. Story-telling humans, this paradigm suggests, aren't really up there when it comes to truthfulness. Literature? Film-making? It's all fantasy, really. No, you want the real paradigm of truth? Mathematics! Physics!

Well, how this works out for us in the religious sphere, is that we typically make assumptions about the forms of life and of practice which would be perfectly appropriate to make if dealing with astronomy, but which are not at all appropriate to dealing with God and with our neighbour. For instance: according to this way of thinking, when it comes to theology, what we need to do is to grasp a theory, get it right. Once we work out the theory, then we can hold onto it, come hell or high water. And once we've got it right, we should go and put it into practice. So, first step: get your theory clear; once it's all tied up and you know your bridge will stand, go off and put it into practice: build the damn thing.

This is a good and useful way of thinking—if you're building bridges. However, from our own experience, most of the things we know about, we know from within, as the result of practice. Very few of us, as infants or kids, sat down and learned a book called *The Theory of Bicycle Riding*, which we had to master before anybody would allow us to sit on a small bicycle. On the contrary, what happened at Christmas, or a birthday, was that a small bicycle with stabiliser wheels appeared. We were gingerly put astride it, held on to, and tried all sorts of moves, falling off a few times and grazing our knees. After a bit, we started to get the hang of it, and found ourselves able to balance without so much dependence on the stabilisers. At a certain point, they were removed, and we were off.

We found ourselves doing something because we saw other people doing it, they encouraged us to do it, they gave us the means to do it, and they helped us through the first bits of it. And because of all this, we find ourselves knowing how to do something, and doing it increasingly well and without even thinking about it.

Now, imagine you have to teach someone else how to ride a bicycle. You would be scarcely likely to say: "Aha, well, I don't want you to learn the bad, old-fashioned way that I learned it, which was by practice and trial and error. I want you to learn it the new-fangled, up-to-date way, which is by my giving you a little book called *Everything You Needed to Know About Bicycle Riding*. And once you've learned that by heart, then we won't need stabiliser wheels, you'll just sit on the thing and go". This would be a disaster! Because one of the things we learn how to do when riding a bicycle is how to hold balance, and other things which, before we actually find ourselves doing them, don't really seem possible. And this is not only true of riding a bicycle; it is true of almost any form of learning—even, dare I say it, of mathematics. Certainly, of language learning, painting, theology, or any other disciplines. We are gradually inducted into a set of practices, such that we find ourselves knowing from within how they work and become more or less skilled operators of them.

When it comes to understanding Christianity, this is absolutely fundamental. If we are under the spell of "physics envy", then Christianity becomes a matter of grasping with our minds a particular soundness of theory and then putting it into practice. What happens is that, very quickly indeed, Christianity becomes very boring. And why wouldn't it? For you can only get the theory right once, and then hold on to it. Thereafter, everything is reduced to how you should behave, to morals. Christianity gets reduced to morals. And this, in my humble opinion, is part of the great collapse of Christianity over the last two hundred years in the West: it has become so exclusively linked to morals, and morals tied to a pre-existing theory, that it has been rendered boring.

There is little more tedious and joyless than morals, when these are how you put into practice something which you are supposed to have learned already. The whole point of what we looked at in our verses from Hebrews is that they were about finding ourselves on the receiving end of an act of communication—which is, in itself, a very interesting, difficult and delicate thing. As a result of being affected by this act of communication, we begin to discover more about ourselves than we already knew—sometimes a frightening thing. We find ourselves developing new sorts of practices that correspond to how we're being

spoken to, attempting to find new ways of becoming excellent through them.

Do you see that this is a rather different picture of the relationship between learning and practice than we're used to? I hope you will see that many things start to make much more sense once we realise it's not a matter of "getting ideas right". It's a question of "sitting under someone doing something to us over time", which means we discover from within what the ideas really mean, as we discover ourselves becoming something. This is really very different from having grasped them from the outside and then tried to put them into practice.

Please notice, before I move to my next point, that what I'm talking about here is not something specific to theology or religion. It's a point of basic anthropology—something that is true about every sort of learning we do: learning a foreign language, the practice of medicine or law, how to play a musical instrument, or coming to appreciate the excellence of music produced by others.

The Grammar of Escaping from a Mentalist World—Induction, Habits, Time

In order that we should be able to resist the temptations of the spell cast by a cultural world dominated by "theory first", I want to work through some notions that have, until recently, had a bad reputation. I call these notions the "grammar of our escape from a mentalist world". The first is the most obvious: the notion of induction—the notion of being led by other people into something over time. This is, of course, how any of us are brought into any sort of skill. Not only advanced skills like those displayed by professional musicians, but basic, infantile things like being able to speak a language at all. Other people induct us into something. This is because we are animals and, as animals, we are muscled creatures. Even our brains, which are not strictly speaking muscles, respond to stimuli as though they were—in other words, they can be stretched, exercised and so forth. And the whole point of muscles is that, in order to work, they need to be exercised. As they get exercised, they function better and better.

This means that one of the things we are inclined to despise, habits, become tremendously important. Habits are stable dispositions which you have acquired over time to be able to behave in certain ways. If you are habitually patient, let us say, it means that, when someone is being particularly aggressive or unfair in their treatment of you, rather than having to bite your tongue and say to yourself, "I must sit this one out, I must sit this one out", you actually find yourself sitting it out without too much effort, because you've done it before. You've acquired a habitual disposition to act in a certain way.

Now, the fact that your behaviour is habitual doesn't mean that it's somehow less valuable than it would be if you were having to bite your tongue. However, our modern mentality tends to think that it's only really good if it's sincere and meant, which means, not habitual, not a disposition, but something that has to be done anew each time the occasion arises. However, this is nonsense.

Let me give driving a car as an example. After reading this chapter, some of you will get up and go somewhere by car. (Some of you, listening to the audiobook, may be in a car right now). Some of you will have, or have had, the option to be given a lift. I want to propose to you a choice of two drivers: Driver A is a cautious and thoughtful person, and before she indicates or turns or does anything else, she thinks: "What must I do next?" "Is that a car that is coming?" "Does it have its lights on?" "Are my lights on?" "Should I turn left?" "Should I turn right?" Before every action which Driver A performs, she gives thought to the matter. Then there is Driver B. She doesn't deliberate about any of these things because she is used to driving. She habitually checks the mirror, observes the traffic, indicates, and picks out what's going on. Now, I bet that, if you have a choice between being taken home by Driver A or Driver B, you'll go with Driver B, because there's far less chance that you'll get into an accident. A driver who has to give thought to everything she does is not good. On the other hand, the fact that there is a habitual lack of spontaneity and "authenticity" about every movement Driver B makes does not make Driver B a worse driver. On the contrary, it is in this that being a skilled driver consists.

Isn't it interesting that, when we hear the word "habit", we tend to supply the value "bad", so that a habit is automatically a bad habit? This

is especially so in matters religious: if something is habitual, that tends to be a sign that it's bad, because it's not sincere, not felt, not authentic. This is a kind of schizophrenia on our part; normally, we know it is *habitual* forms of excellence that are really excellent, while constantly thought-through ones are those of beginners.

Another example might be a doctor. Let us imagine a doctor who has to go through a checklist of every possible thing that might be wrong with you while making a diagnosis. He is going to be much slower and less good a doctor than one who has developed a kind of "finger touch", who is so accustomed to finding things out: it seems to be by instinct that he so regularly and speedily finds out what's wrong. You would be fooling yourself if you thought it really was by instinct; it isn't. It's a very highly developed skill, a habitual excellence in detection. More often than not, such a doctor doesn't need deliberately to go through the checklist, though every now and then there will be something that catches him out, and he'll say, "I'm sorry, I'm not quite sure about this—we'll have to do a test". I'm pretty sure we would all prefer to be treated by the habitually skilled doctor rather than by the rigorous stop-and-think Doctor.

All I want to point out is that habits—which we often regard, especially in the religious sphere, as bad things—are in fact what make excellence possible. They are what make skills work. There is nothing new about saying this. Aristotle said it a long time ago, but we have tended to junk it since the seventeenth century. But it is a good idea to remember Aristotle from time to time; in this, at least, his observation about how the human animal works is true.

So, we are inducted by others into the acquisition of stable dispositions over time. And it is this matter of "over time" that I would like us to consider next. Because the assumption behind the picture of truth I gave you—the grasped, theoretical picture—is that what is really true is true outside time. If it were time-laden in some way, it wouldn't be so true. The moment time gets involved, things start getting relative, so what is really true has got to be somehow free from time. It's got to be true yesterday, and today, and tomorrow, and not subject to the ravages and alterations of change and time. True ideas must be time-free.

Well, I want to remind us of something we all know: for us humans, time is not an option. We are intrinsically time-laden. There's no such thing as a human who is not shot-through with time. All our perceptions are inescapably time-related, and none of this is a bad thing at all. Quite the contrary. Rather than our time-clad nature leading somehow to a defect of truthfulness in us, it is the condition of possibility for this sort of creature to be truth-bearing. It's when we are aware of just how much we are affected by time that we become skilled tellers of the truth. We know, for instance, that each year has 365 days. Nevertheless, the 365 days between your eighth birthday and your ninth birthday, and the 365 days between your fiftieth birthday and your fifty-first birthday, felt very different indeed. You might say, "mathematically they are the same", but psychologically they are not at all. You start to look back in quite a different way as your lifespan gets longer. The years seem to get shorter as perspective comes in. And this means that the kinds of truth you tell, the ways you describe things, show an understanding of time marked by your place in it.

We all know this. It's perfectly obvious. However, we rarely remember, officially, that we are not all on the same playing field. There isn't a universal, psychological measure of time. There are only all of our different measures of time, and how we actually live them. Think, for instance, of the television news. Imagine we start watching a regular news show—the 9 O'Clock News, for instance—when we are ten years old, and we carry on watching it more or less regularly until we die, say, in our nineties. Usually, the anchor is a person somewhere between thirty and fifty, dressed in a more or less neutral kind of way, with a relatively neutral but somehow reassuring voice. They talk about what happened that day in a somewhat deadpan style, so as to get through whatever it is that has occurred. And this is important to us, since none of us would describe any of those events in the same way. The newscaster says, "Today, a bomb went off in a Gaza marketplace, killing upwards of twenty people. A new poll shows Senator McDoody edging slightly ahead in the Republican Primary in Alaska. Taylor Swift has been awarded billions at the conclusion of a long, drawn-out defamation battle. A large earthquake in Kamchatka failed to produce the expected Tsunami along the Pacific Rim, and Apple announced the launch of its new

iSatellite". All these things come off in the same tone of voice. Now, a nine-year-old living in Gaza or Kamchatka would have described exactly the same event as we have just heard in an entirely different way from his or her 70-year-old grandfather living in the same place. For each of them, the event will be part of a quite different series of expectations, hopes, fears, memories, considerations of normalcy and so forth. The same will be true of voters in Alaska concerning Senator McDoody, or of computer-illiterate seniors concerning the latest "must-have gadget" from Apple when compared with their teenage relatives.

Curiously, then, we're all used to an entirely fake, apparent, timelessness. Nevertheless, it's interesting how often we assume that the timelessness is real, whereas, in fact, all our capacities for living any of these events are time-soaked. And this time-soakèdness is good! Without this, we would not be telling the truth; we would not be talking as humans.

The "Social Other" and its Priority

This leads me to my third point: here I'm going to introduce you to a phrase I'll use a fair amount in this book, so I want you to know what I mean by it. The point I want to get across is that the "social other" precedes us, is prior to us. By the "social other", I mean everything that is other than "me", in the case of each one of us: other people, the climate, the weather, the country, the geography, the atmosphere, the agriculture which enables food to be grown and so on. Please notice that I don't include "God" in this collection; God is not part of the social other. Everything that actually exists in our universe is the social other. God, as we will see later, is not something or someone that exists as part of our universe. In fact, you'll often find me talking about God as the "other Other". So when I talk about the social other, I'm once again speaking at an entirely human level—if you like, a wholly horizontal level. The air we breathe, the history we receive, our parents, neighbours, politicians, and educational systems, for example.

What I want to bring out about all these members of the social other is something undeniable that we usually forget: the social other is

massively prior to us at every point in our lives. On the one hand, where were you when your parents set about conceiving you? You weren't. That's the whole point. We weren't there. We made no decision about the matter. We were not consulted. There was not a "me" there to do any of that. Someone else did something, and it began the process by which we started coming into being. It's worth stopping and remembering this from time to time: we were utterly dependent on something quite other than us, over which we had no control at all, bringing us into being.

On the other hand, it's not merely that they brought you into being, then stopped and said: "Okay, now that we've conceived the little bugger, he's going to be a self-directed being—like a toy that will run until the battery gives out". Quite the contrary! Compared with other animals, and considering our size, we have a very long gestation period. Nine months of gestation, and then an even longer period in which we are not regarded as viable by other members of our race. In other words, for nine months, we are wholly vulnerable, entirely protected by someone else. Not only protected, but actually given everything we are from our mother and her body—and, with a bit of luck, protected additionally by another human who enables this female person herself to be relatively safe, warm and fed, despite her increased vulnerability to storms, robbery, murder, rape: her decreased ability to fend for herself while bearing a child.

Then the blighter is born. Do we say: "At last, here is our fully-functional project—wind the damn thing up and let it go?" Not a bit of it. What happens to an abandoned baby? It dies. A self-starting baby is dead within a very short time. Not only do we not self-start or self-gestate. We can't even begin to look after ourselves once we are born. We don't even know how to control our own temperatures. We are totally dependent on what is other than us for food, warmth, and protection. Part of our vulnerability is that our bodies are born in quite different proportions from those they'll have when we grow up, which is rare among other mammals. If you've ever seen a mare foaling, it's a wonderful thing: the mare drops a foal, licks off a bit of the afterbirth. Within a very short time, the foal kicks open its legs like a camera tripod, and within a few hours of birth, it's trotting around the field.

Furthermore, it's already the same basic proportion—legs to body to neck to head—that it's going to be for the rest of its life. Of course, it's going to get much bigger. But what is amazing is quite how viable it is, how quickly, and quite how unviable we are, for so long: how utterly dependent we are on the social other.

This is even more than a matter of basic biology. It is not as if we come wrapped in a body that needs all this care, attention, and bother from others; still, really, inside this, there is this pre-packaged, self-starting individual who is just raring to go as soon as the wretched body-wrapping develops enough. No! In fact, we are dependent on the social other—usually our parents or guardians—to begin developing a "self" at all. It is the movements they make towards us which start firing off our mirror neurons, so that we start to reproduce in our brains the things that are done to us and which we see other people doing. In other words, neuroscientists have discovered something else that Aristotle knew without anything like the same detail or sophistication: what we are is incredibly well-equipped imitators, and the imitation is kicked off by someone doing something to, at, or in front of us. You stick your tongue out at an infant, and the infant will stick its tongue back out at you within an incredibly short time after birth. More amazing, only a little while later, the infant will know how to defer imitation: if you put a pacifier (or dummy, as we call them in the UK) into an infant's mouth, and then stick your tongue out at it, at a time when it can't stick its tongue back out at you, and then later remove the dummy, the infant will stick its tongue out at you then.

This is far more than cute—it's astounding. It means that, within an amazingly short time, the infant's mirror neurons are fired off in such a way as to create not only the possibility of imitation, but the possibility of imitation staggered over time, which is the beginning of memory. And it is having a memory that is going to make a person a viable "self". Once, rather later, you start to get that deferral of imitation linked to language, to repeated gestures and sounds, you get the beginning of memory and the condition of possibility of someone telling a story about themselves. Far from being a self-starting little individual, the little bundle is fired off by other people doing things to and at it. This will go on for a very long time. As any educationalist knows,

there is a world of difference between a parent, a guardian or a teacher talking to an infant and leaving an infant in front of the television. The same sounds can appear on the television and will not be learned; they do not fire off the mirror neurons. As infants, we can, amazingly, distinguish between things being done which are not part of something being done towards us, and exactly the same things being done towards us. It is the latter that produces in us skills, language and so forth.

Desire According to the Desire of the Other

Now, there is something even more amazing than this. So far you might say: OK, the social other gives us a body, and, reluctant though we be to admit it, it is the social other which produces in us the capacity for memory, for language and so on. But nevertheless, deep, deep within us are our desires. These are surely ours, these surely come from us, and then somehow latch on to the scaffolding which the social other has so painstakingly set up within us.

Well, once again, this is wrong! What is increasingly evident is that, when we talk about imitation being the motor through which the social other brings us into being, we are talking even about our desire. Not our instincts, which are biologically determined, but our desire, which is how those instincts are received, handled and lived socially in the case of this very malleable animal which we are. Scientists have observed that an infant can distinguish—once again from very, very early on—between an adult doing something and an adult failing to do the same thing. Imagine an adult slowly and deliberately putting a doughnut-shaped rubber ring on a stick in front of an infant. Now imagine that adult trying, but failing, to put the ring on the stick. What is astounding is that the infant will imitate the successful putting of the ring on the stick, but will not imitate the failure. In other words, the child is not imitating the mechanical movement; the child is imitating the intention, something entirely invisible and non-mechanical.

This is something which my guru, René Girard, had already pointed out in philosophical terms forty years previously, and the "hard science" is catching up with it now: intention is picked up from the other.

Or, in Girard's language, which is the language I prefer to use: we desire according to the desire of the other. I want to do what you want to do. I want to be who you are. You suggest me into being through driving my imitation of you. What is enormously important here is that it is the interaction between the other person's desire and our mirror neurons which allows us to develop empathy, and this is what starts to give us being over time, a sense of who we are. Who we are is given to us by the regard of another. How does a baby first learn who it is? By seeing itself reflected in one who is other than it (and we've all seen how excited infants are by relatives wearing spectacles, since the infants can see themselves in the reflection). As it is treated by an adult, so will it take itself to be. If the adult is terrified of this whole business of having the child, and holds the child with fear, what the baby will learn is: "I am a fearful thing". It will hold itself with fear. If the parent is relaxed, the baby will see that the parent is pleased it is there and will pick up: "I am a good thing to be around". We are given to be who we are through the eyes of another. This entirely anthropological insight will be central to everything we learn in this book.

I'd like to strengthen this point with one further example of how the social other gives us to be—runs us, if you like: that of language. It's not merely that we learn words from imitating the sounds of people who are other than us, though we do do that. In fact, we find ourselves being inserted into a language. The language was here before us. English had been spoken for hundreds of years before we came along and started mucking it up. We were inducted into hearing sounds, experiencing them, trying to find out what they mean, bouncing them off people by saying sometimes the wrong thing and expecting to be corrected—or shouted at, or knocked down—until we find ourselves engaging skilfully with the use of the English language. But we didn't invent it. On the contrary, we became symptoms of it. It invented us. That's the bizarre thing: it's because we find ourselves swimming within a particular language structure that we are able to express ourselves in certain ways.

Any of you who is fluent in a language other than your mother tongue knows your pattern of feelings is subtly different in another language. You're a somewhat different person; you feel things differently;

there are emotions and ways of being and doing things that you can't quite translate. And there's nothing wrong with that! You are a symptom of the language which speaks itself through you. This doesn't mean you can't be inventive in a language. However, all of us can tell the difference between someone who is "inventive" in a language because they are not very good at it and so will occasionally come up with interesting new phrases because they've got their grammar wrong. We can tell the difference between someone like that and someone like Shakespeare, who habitually got the grammar wrong and invented new words and phrases out of, if you like, an effervescence of excellence. A Frenchwoman learning to speak English for the first time is not on the same plane as Shakespeare with regard to creative use of language. In the former, the creative use of language is a sign of not yet having become an appropriate symptom, a skilled channel for the language. In the latter, it is a sign of having such mastery over the language that he is able to flout all the rules, get away with it, and be appreciated for it.

So the other is prior to us as regards all these physical, linguistic, and mental things, as well as desire. The reason why I've taken such a long and deliberate route to get here is that it opens up for us something which, again, we all know to be true, but usually forget, which is how utterly dependent we are on the desires of others for *wanting* things. The people who do remember how true this is—indeed, whose profession depends wholly on their remembering it—are those associated with the advertising industry. They know perfectly well that the desire for something I neither need nor want, and which is at the very outer edge of my budgetary possibilities, is something that can be produced in me. They need to provide a model of some sort for my desires—someone who is attractive, who is clearly enjoying him or herself, who has a certain "zing" to them and who is more or less subtly indicating that it is ownership of this car, or immersion in the social life associated with this drink, that has led them to be the beautiful, successful, well-poised chick-magnet—or hunk-trawler, or whatever—that they are. Message: if only I had that, then I could be more like them. Without it, I'm only half a human being, with the wrong body shape and so on.

As an example of how well advertisers understand this, they have come up with something called "viral marketing", which works as fol-

lows. Scouts from, as it were, Adidas or Nike will go around certain high schools. They are trained to watch for the most popular kids, the trend-setters, the ones who clearly "have it" and who everyone else wants to be like—as opposed to the left-out ones, the ones who skulk around by themselves at recreation time. Then the scouts will go to the popular kids and give them a new pair of whatever it is they are selling—Air Jordans, for instance. They do this because they know very well that by giving away just one well-placed pair here and there, they will sell 300 pairs in a week. Because if *those* kids have it, everyone who wants to be anyone has to have it. This is viral marketing, whereby an object that has little or no value in itself acquires huge value because someone else has it. That desire spreads like an epidemic: because we desire according to the desire of the other.

This is true of us, whether it is to do with clothes, wives, holidays, cars, homes, husbands, boyfriends, girlfriends—you name it! We are the animal whose instincts have been transformed into desires. Even the basic instinctual forms of life which we have—the way we sleep, eat, the way we have sex—are all received by us in patterns pre-shaped by the desires of others. It is the social other which reproduces itself in and as the body of each of us, thus bringing into being that subsection of the "we" which is a "me".

Sorry to have gone on for so long about this, but I really want us to be free from the pop-psychology picture most of us tend to fall back on. This pop-psychology picture presupposes that somewhere, relatively independent of the accidents of birth, background, and upbringing, there is a real me. This real me is authentic and has its own desires, and that's what makes me different from everybody else. Although I'm temporarily dependent on other people in an annoying kind of way, I'm not really dependent. Really, I am the centre of the universe, just waiting for the rest of it to get to its knees and acknowledge the fact.

Well, as you have seen, this is nonsense. There is a real "me", but it is real as a project over time that is being brought into being through this specific body, born in this definite time and place to these particular parents. It is how this body has learned, over time, to negotiate with the "we" that precedes and surrounds it. It is this body over time that is

different from anybody else's. The patterns of desire are what make us similar, not what makes us different!

The Importance of Memory

Within this picture of the social other reproducing itself in and as each one of "us", I'd just like to check back and look a little more at memory. You remember that memory is produced in us over time as mirror neurons are fired off, and we start to make repetitive gestures and sounds. We begin to be able to defer response very quickly indeed. We find ourselves imitating sounds and gestures, coordinating them in such a way that they combine into forms of communication and language. With this, we are beginning to be able to situate ourselves within the group which surrounds us. We are beginning to be capable of becoming a viable "I" in the midst of a "we". It's not that the "we" is a collection of "I"s that banded together; the "we" is what enabled the "I"s to come into being. And this "I" negotiating its place amidst the "we" over time is beginning to be able to tell a story of "myself". I came from X, I was born in Y, I am from this family, from that social class, with this educational level—from all of these, I begin to be able to tell a story about myself. Even in such basic, childish things as "I didn't break it. She did it", and other such attempts to negotiate the "we" of parental outrage.

Memory consists of these attempts to start telling a story. Memory is, among other things, our ability to be viable as a person. This is why a person who either has total amnesia or is in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease is one of the most difficult things for us to come across. It's not that they've forgotten who they are, as though there were a "self" that held their memories. Quite the reverse: since it is our memory that structures—holds in being—our "selves", they have lost who they are. Other people have to hold who they are in being for them—know where they come from, what they're about, where they used to live, where they live now, and why. It is not we who have memories; memories have us. Bizarre though it may be to say so, it is more accurate. It is the memories which underpin an "I" who is able to tell the story.

This is going to be very important in our course, as we come to look at the role of narrative in all our lives, for we are aware that memories are not always accurate. Memories alter over time—sometimes owing to perspective, sometimes through forgetfulness, loss, or blockages provoked by traumatic events, and occasionally through deliberate distortions. At times, we try to present a fake account of ourselves. We try to pretend that we are the Grand Duchess Anastasia, or some other figure of fantasy. In other words, memories can be true or false. But without them, there is not even a fake "I". Nevertheless, the ability to be the sort of person who *remembers*—which is to say, who re-members, pieces together the bits—is part of what makes us human. This means that narrative is not an extra in our lives; it is constitutive of our lives.

Story Telling and Revisionist Historians

This leads, as you can imagine, to a further element in our awareness of how dubious the picture of truthfulness is that prizes mathematics and physics over narrative. Storytelling is not a second-rate form of human truthfulness: it is the basic framework within which humans communicate at all. There really is no such thing as entirely non-narrative knowledge for humans. Why? Because even mathematicians, astronomers, and physicists are members of storytelling communities which have become able to make their discoveries and develop their cutting edges through particular conjunctions and shifts in conjunctions in the way stories are told. I'm glad to say that, nowadays, scientists are some of the most straightforward and compelling advocates of this post-Cartesian way of understanding things.

Now, this leads to something we've touched on before: because we are people who are born in time, receive our "I"s over time, receive our ability to find ourselves through other people, and are people who are inducted into skills over time, so we find our perspectives shifting over time. Because of this, every form of scientific knowledge and endeavour is also time-related. There is a narrative element to it, without which it could not be. And this makes us all, whether we like the term or not, revisionist historians.

You probably remember the term "revisionist historian" from the Cold War period. It was the kind of thing Communists were accused of being by outraged westerners. The accusation ran like this: "Those Communists completely tailor all the facts to explain how Cuba, or North Korea, or Albania was always on the road to becoming a perfect socialist state. Every conceivable moment in that country's historical past somehow prefigures the current state of affairs. Anything inconvenient to this picture is somehow forgotten, and, mysteriously, explorers, artists, as well as soldiers of previous generations are discovered to have been Socialists "avant la lettre". Because of this, Communists will demonstrate that there is only one true understanding of history, and all other historical roads lead to this current socialist understanding of where we are now. Everything is always leading up to *us*".

This was the sort of accusation made about revisionist historians, and their critics would point out: "But this is nonsense. There are an awful lot of other ways to understand the history of, say, Cuba or North Korea. Revisionist history is bad history". And I want to say: Yes, indeed. Revisionist historians did indeed produce bad history. We all know that. History is much too mucky an affair for any of us to be able to determine in advance what the grand sweep of everything will be and was always meant to be. But on the other hand, all of us always effectively do the same. We are all revisionist historians, because there is no other way to tell the story of how we came to be and who we are—and the way we have is not entirely bad.

Think of it this way: imagine that you are a thirteen-year-old, and someone puts you on the spot and says: "Tell me who you are and what you're about". You think long and hard, with the sincerity and innocence that a thirteen-year-old can still summon up, and give a perfectly appropriate, limited, thirteen-year-old's answer. Then, twenty years later, someone else comes along and says to you: "Tell me who you are and what you are about". You remember what you said when you were thirteen, and say to yourself: "Gosh, I must be honest. Even though it was a long time ago, if I am to be a consistent and truthful person, then I must say the same thing, or else I'm somehow lying". So you come out with the same answer you gave when you were thirteen.

Well, I hope that the person talking to the thirty-something you would look at you with astonishment and horror, and think that you probably needed to be taken to an asylum. Because they would have discovered you to be someone so incredibly fragile that, in the years between 13 and 33, you had learned nothing about who you are. Your picture of who you are has not developed at all. Dating, falling in love, going to school, going to university, maybe fighting a war, getting married, having children—none of these things made the slightest impact on your account of who you are. In other words, you have failed to become a revisionist historian. You have failed to be able to tell someone about yourself in such a way that all those things were included in some organically developing narrative.

Now, it is also possible to be a *bad* revisionist historian: a Jeffrey Archer figure, coming out with a full CV, invented university degrees, Olympic medals you never won, and so forth. You could be a liar; you could be a fantasist. Both of these are forms of revisionist history. My point is not that there cannot be bad forms of revisionist history, but that you cannot be truthful *except as a revisionist historian*. We revise our story as we go along, and if we didn't, we would be *less*, not *more*, truthful. Later on in this course, you're going to see how important this is for theology, because without it, the notion of the forgiveness of sins would mean nothing. Someone whose sins are being forgiven is someone who is being let go of their past in a certain way and being given a whole new perspective from which to hold themselves in relation to their past. In other words, a massive—and often initially painful—revision of their story is being given to them by someone else. This revision is not, however, the enemy of truthfulness: it is because we are revisionist historians that we are able to become truthful.

"Revelation" and "Discovery"

Just one last little piece of basic anthropology before I give you a quick theological jab in the arm to try and inoculate you against one of the big problems we'll come up against: one of the words we are used to hearing in matters religious is the word "revelation". Of course, how we

understand that word is of a piece with how we imagine undergoing the act of communication with which we began this chapter. Typically, our picture of "revelation" is of someone important—God, for instance—imparting something from on high that we're then supposed to know about and hold fast to. Of course, that fits very well with the grasping picture, the mentalist framework that I've been trying to wean us off: God imparts that which we then hold on to.

I'd like us to consider our normal human usage of this word "revelation", which I think gives us a much more accurate picture of what is going on. For instance, when a tabloid newspaper makes a "revelation", what does it usually mean? Usually, it is a form of spilling the beans about the private lives of politicians, actresses, or religious leaders. This alters public perception of the person, leading them to resign or whatever. Or, there is the rather more positive form of revelation, such as when someone like Pavarotti is about to sing an opera, but has a bad attack of hiccups and can't go on stage. The director casts about and finds an understudy, a barrow-boy from Barnsley, whom no one has ever heard sing live on stage before. He appears in an ill-fitting costume, all nervous, his first time before a real audience, opens his mouth, and stuns everybody. The audience, the critics, and the newspapers all say: "Fred was a revelation! The barrow-boy from Barnsley is now a world-class tenor! Who would have thought a barrow-boy from Barnsley would make it into the big league of operatic stardom?" Well, this is a "revelation" in the sense of something completely unexpected. But what is being revealed is something that was true before—that Fred has a superlative voice—but no one knew about it. And while the likes of Pavarotti occupied the stage, no one was going to know about it! So that's a slightly more positive sense of "revelation".

How about the following classroom examples? You are a parent; your child comes home from school and says: "Mummy, Mummy" or "Daddy, Daddy—do you know 22,793,456 people are living in Mexico City?" And you say: "Gosh, how utterly amazing!" but immediately get on with preparing supper, or whatever you were doing before, because this piece of information, while true, is not very interesting. It would only be a revelation to you if you were a member of a small and improbable sect of people who deny the existence of Mexico City. For

such people, who believed there were no people there at all, the news comes as a shock. But mostly you carry on, rather expecting your proud progeny to come in tomorrow and announce that King Henry VIII had six wives. In short, we're talking here about imparting information: something is being revealed, but it's only got a certain weight.

Let's ratchet this up a little: you can imagine a twelve or thirteen-year-old child coming in a few days later and saying: "Mummy, Mummy, I've decided I'm going out with X or Y"—let us say Cassie, or Johnny. OK. This is a bit of a revelation. You had kind of suspected they were almost at the age when this kind of thing would start to happen, but you hoped the childhood thing would go on maybe a little longer. Nevertheless, you realised this was going to happen eventually. So yes, it's a bit of a revelation. You're also aware that some of their friends are the sort of people you don't want them to hang out with, and, well, there's another tangent for you to go off worrying about. In any case, they come in and tell you about Cassie or Johnny or whoever. A slight revelation, a little earth-tremor in your system, but the tremor is to do with: "God, am I that old already? Lord, they've grown up quickly, their childhood's almost over"—all that kind of stuff. So here, yes, information is being imparted, but it's more than information. It's the beginning of a change in a set of relationships, or the bringing-out into the open of changes that had already started, but hadn't yet been shared with you.

Then imagine this scenario: your thirteen-year-old child comes home and says, "Mummy, Mummy, I'm pregnant" or "Mummy, Mummy, I'm gay". Much bigger earth tremor! Now they've said something that genuinely wasn't part of what you could or would normally expect. That a child should announce, at twelve or thirteen, that they are "going out" with someone really is par for the course. But for a twelve or thirteen-year-old to announce that they are either pregnant or gay is a communication of a slightly different magnitude. What is being communicated is actually going to alter your relationship with them forever. It is introducing something new—something quite unexpected, and entirely outside your control—into the relationship, and into the sphere of relationships you share. You are going to find yourself relating to them, to your other relatives, to teachers, friends, and other children in quite new ways. You are going to find yourself having to discover a

lot about yourself and about them that you didn't know; you are finding yourself put into a new position by them.

What I want to suggest is that, when we come to talk about "Divine Revelation", we're talking about something more akin to the "I'm pregnant" or "I'm gay" announcement than to the Mexico City population announcement. We're talking about the kind of earth tremor of something happening outside your control, but which is going to alter your relationship to everybody else and lead you into a process of discovering things about yourself and others that you didn't know before, making these discoveries as your relationships alter.

The reason I bring this up is that, often enough, when we are stuck in our minds, we think of revelation as the equivalent of God imparting information about Mexico City's population. We don't notice that there is a process of discovery involved. However, the anthropological correlate to "revelation" is "discovery". What does it look like when there has been a revelation amongst humans? It looks like a process of discovery. What does it look like when a meteorite has hit the Earth? It looks like a concavity. From the concavity, you can deduce a good deal about the meteorite which hit. If there were no concavity, you would say it was not a real meteorite, just a paper one or a virtual one. It is the same thing with the old saw about teaching: where nothing has been learned, nothing has been taught. There has only really been teaching when there has been learning. The anthropological correlate to teaching is learning. The anthropological correlate to revelation is discovery.

I hope you now see why I wanted to bring this up. A good deal of what we will be looking at in these chapters concerns the shape of the concavity: different dimensions of the anthropological correlate of a revelation.

Not a Moral Story, but a Story Told by "Bad" People

My final, very quick point—a quick jab in the arm which usually gets me into trouble: you are embarking on a course of induction into the Christian faith; twelve chapters of theology. And usually, when people hear words like "Christian faith", "theology" and the like, a pernicious

moralistic veil hangs about those words, such that you imagine you are signing up to a group of good people meeting together to talk about being good.

I really, really want to disabuse you of this. The presupposition behind this course is that we are not good people, that we do not know how to speak well—and that it doesn't really matter, since it is someone else's business to make us good, and their business over time. The gospel story—the concavity in our humanity pointed up by the Apostolic witnesses—is a story told by people who are not good, about something which happened in their midst and which shook up their previous sense of goodness. It gave them a longing for a quite other sort of goodness, one which they then found themselves becoming, not through their own efforts but at the hands of someone else—and all this to the very great scandal of those who were experts in goodness.

This, I think, is vital for us to remember: this course presupposes that we who are gathering together, or reading or listening—and I, who am attempting to pass it on—are, however well we may veil it, liars, fantasists, thieves, self-publicists, manipulators, addicts to phony reputations and to emotional blackmail, deeply self-deceived, muddled, and sometimes quite vicious. The presupposition of this course is that it is *people of this sort*—the self-deceived ones wedded to our self-deception and our deception of others—who are being spoken to. We are on the receiving end of an act of communication from someone who knows *all that* about us, is not taken in by us, is not concerned by how little good we are—and yet, even so, wants to take us to another place.

For many of us, this is a difficult thing to sink into since, in addition to grasping onto a sound "theory" and then practising "morals", our self-identity as "good" is one of our most sacred idols. It is one of the things that makes us most dangerous to others and to ourselves. This is why it is so difficult for us to be forgiven. Only those people who are not good in their own eyes can allow themselves to be forgiven.

One of the things I hope will happen as you undergo this course is that you will be able to relax into the realisation that being good or bad is not what it's about—it's about being loved.