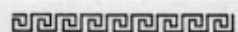




# ONE

## THE BEGINNING

### *To Question or Not to Question, That Is the Question*



*The following journey was an inside-out dream that I had (or that had me).*

It was a dream, but it seemed I was its object, not its subject, the dreamed-about, not the dreamer. My earthly life appeared to me through a heavenly mind. Whether this was my own future heavenly mind, or God's mind, or the mind of an angel, or something else, I could not tell. But in my dream it seemed to me that I was *in* that heavenly mind looking down on my earthly life from above, rather than generating heavenly fantasies from below. This "above-below" reversal was physical as well as mental: instead of being flat on my back on a bed gazing upward, I seemed to be floating, or swimming, face down, as on a wave, body-surfing my life, looking through the water at a lobsterlike creature scuttling across the sea floor. (My name, Kreeft, means "lobster" in Dutch, by the way.)

The journey began in my present, which is middle age—just as Dante's journey did:

In the midway of this our mortal life

I found me in a gloomy wood astray,

Gone from the path direct . . .

How first I entered it, I scarce can say.<sup>\*</sup> Instead of a gloomy wood, I found myself in a gloomy underground cave. It was enormous, yet I felt claustrophobic. Behind me I saw row upon row of people sitting in comfortable chairs, as in a movie theater. They were all intently watching the play of shadows on a wall of the cave.

I immediately recognized the cave as Plato's—the most famous image in the history of philosophy. As soon as I realized where I was, I heard a harsh and ugly voice speaking in a surprisingly winsome way. It came from the ugliest man I had ever seen. His body was

short, fat and twisted; his head was oversized, bald and bulbous; his eyes were froggy; and his nose was pug. I instantly recognized my favorite philosopher.

"Socrates!" I cried joyfully. "Is it really you?"

"As really me as that thing I am looking at is really you," he replied with a cryptic twinkle.

Foolishly trying to impress Socrates with my cleverness, I said, "You mean you can't see my soul, my true self, only my body."

"No, I mean only what I say," he replied. "It's a strange habit of mine that you will just have to get used to, I'm afraid. I meant only that if the laws of logic have not been suspended, you can be sure of this, at least: that I am I and you are you. **Everything seems to have this strangely stubborn habit of being itself**, being logically consistent. As for me, I only try to copy that habit. So do you think you can endure the presence of such a strange creature, one who is constantly out of alignment with people whenever they are out of alignment with truth? One who takes the side of truth against humankind rather than the side of humankind against truth?"

"I would love to have you as my companion, Socrates. Are we going to hang around this cave like bats, or will you lead me out?"

"Well, now, **that depends on you**. If I guide you on this journey, I will only give you maps, and advice, and arguments. **It is you who must choose at each fork in the road.**"

"What road? I see no road."

"That one." He pointed to a dimly discernible path, strewn with rocks, that climbed steeply, perilously close to abysses, and ducked through tiny tunnels that we would clearly have to crawl through.

"And where is the first fork in the road, the first choice I have to make?" I asked dubiously.

"Why, right here of course. Right here at the beginning."

"I don't see it."

"How can you miss it?"

"Please show me."

"No, let's see whether you can find it for yourself. I will not tell you, only teach you; that is, I will only ask you some questions so that you can tell yourself. That's my style, you know. I just can't make speeches. The last long speech I had to make was a disaster. I can still taste that hemlock!"

"I know your method, Socrates. Ask away!"

"Tell me, then, **what does one do at the beginning of any journey?**"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do. Just remember the logical law of consistency, the **law of identity** that we spoke of a moment ago. Now what do you do at the beginning?"

"You begin, I suppose." I was beginning to sound petulant.

"Bravo!" Socrates cheered, as if I had just discovered the theory of relativity. "And does this **just happen to you, or do you have to choose to begin?**"

"You have to choose," I said.

"Well, then, there is your first choice: to begin, or not. To travel, or not. To seek a way out of this cave, or not. To get on this road, or not."

"If I seek a way out, can you guarantee me that I will find it?"

"No. But I *can* guarantee that if you do *not* seek it, you will not find it. Is that not enough to move you to seek?"

"I don't know, to be quite honest with you . . ."

"Please do. Please be quite honest with me. Nothing will work unless you are."

"I have doubts . . . All those people sitting here in this cave—it seems confined, but they seem very happy and content."

"Content they surely are. Whether they are happy or not is another question—unless happiness is nothing more than contentment."

"Don't you think it is?"

"What *I* think is not important—or shouldn't be, to you. What do *you* think?"

"I think it is. **If you're content, you're happy.**"

"Have you ever heard of 'contented cows'?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever watched a cow? Have you ever observed how contented cows are?"

"Yes."

"And how discontented humans are?"

"Yes indeed."

"Tell me, do you think you can be happier than any cow?"

"Yes . . ."

"But you are not as *contented* as a cow?"

"No."

"Then it follows that **happiness cannot be the same thing as contentment**, does it not?"

"I guess it does."

"So which do you seek? Contentment or happiness?"

"Happiness."

"Good. Then we can travel. You see, I cannot lead you out of this cave unless you *choose* to seek the way out. And to do that, you must be discontent, not content. You must disobey the first law of your society's most popular prophets."

"What law? What prophets?"

"Your pop psychologists, whose law is 'Accept yourself as you are.' In other words, be contented, be a cow. If you will not choose to question their authority, you will not question anything, except the shadows on the wall of this cave."

"I see. My first choice, then, is to choose whether to be **Socrates dissatisfied or a cow satisfied.**"

I thought Socrates was getting ready to congratulate me on this wisdom, and I was getting ready to feel satisfied about my dissatisfaction, when suddenly one of the inhabitants of the cave rose from his seat, turned to me and interrupted. I saw that he came not from one of the small chairs but from a tasteful little walled garden in an unusually pleasant corner of the cave.

"Don't let this charlatan seduce you," he said to me. "There is nowhere else to go except this cave. **This is all there is.** Tales of another world outside the cave are mere myths. There is no proof of those other realms that Socrates will claim to lead you into. Only children believe such fantasies."

Disconcerted, I now began to doubt and wonder what I was to do. Socrates, however, was neither disconcerted nor upset by the man's attack. He even seemed to recognize him as an old friend. "Why, **Epicurus!** I suspected you would show up. It seems it is time for us to go to war again for another soul."

"Another *self*, Socrates," Epicurus corrected him. "I must keep reminding you that a **self is not a soul but a body**, the thing you see here before you. But you keep talking to some invisible spirit or ghost—something that frightens children in their dreams." Turning to me, Epicurus said, "Come with me into my garden of delights. Make the most of the only world you have. Eat, drink and be merry."

"He asks you to abort your escape from this prison," interrupted Socrates. "And instead of beginning the journey on the road to freedom, to sit down by the roadside and play with the pretty flowers."

"The choice is between these real flowers and the imaginary ones in some other unreal world," Epicurus said, still focusing on me. "**Why give up the only thing you're sure of?**"

I was by now quite perplexed and did not know which guide to believe. I wanted to find out more about Epicurus's garden. "What flowers grow in your garden?" I asked him.

"Whatever brings you pleasure," he replied. "Whatever pleases you. Sex and money seem to be the two most popular ones in your time."

I found that it was impossible to lie or hide or dissimulate in this world. "I must admit I am strongly attracted by your offer."

"It would save endless wear and tear on your shoe leather and your skin," he argued. "Look at all those sharp stones on that road."

I turned to Socrates. "Can you prove to me that it is better to travel than to stay?"

"I cannot," he said. "If you do not want to make this wager, I cannot force you."

"So you are asking me, then, to make a blind leap of faith on your authority."

"I am *not*," he replied, indignantly. "I am asking you to *question* all authorities, to do that thing that sounds so easy but proves so strenuous: to think for yourself, to wonder. Philosophy begins in wonder, you know."

"Suppose I choose not to wonder?"

"Then you have chosen not to choose. Remember—you do not have a choice between some philosophy and no philosophy, only between good philosophy and bad philosophy."

I knew in my heart that he was right. And at that point a strange feeling came over me that I had had only once before in my life: when I proposed to my wife. I felt at the same time totally free to choose either way and totally destined to choose one way alone—totally free and totally fated. I turned my back on the cave and Epicurus's garden, placed my right foot on the road and said: "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me!"—and felt freer than I had ever felt before.

I set out alone with Socrates to climb the narrow, steep and rocky path. But after a few steps, I hesitated and turned around one more time. The poor prisoners were still there, unmoving, chained to their shadows by their own addiction to comfort and security. There stood Epicurus in his pretty little yuppie garden.

As I looked back, I half feared being turned into a pillar of salt. What happened instead was that I noticed something, from my higher vantage point on the climbing path, that I had not noticed before. Behind Epicurus's flowers was a skull, grinning.

As I went on, I reflected that this first choice of mine was surely going to be only the first of many choices; that it was the most reasonable and obviously right choice I could ever make; and that it was nevertheless perhaps the hardest and most unpopular choice I would ever make. The road was bare; surely this was "the road less traveled." To follow it I had to deny and disobey a god, the god most of my compatriots worshiped more deeply and absolutely than any other, the god of sameness, the religion of egalitarianism. I had to have the crazy, fanatical courage to seek truth instead as my absolute. *Good grief!* I reflected. *My soul is becoming like Socrates.* I hoped my body would not have to do the same.

As we trudged along, I asked, "Socrates, I am very curious about something. I know that was Epicurus, and I know he lived many years after you died. Yet you knew him as an old friend. Are we beyond time? Are we in ... in ... Where are we, anyway?"

Socrates' eyes danced. "No, you are not dead, like me. This world is not the world of the dead, but of the living. It is your world, not mine. I am sent here as—as an outsider, you might say."

"What were you about to say? A ghost? A prophet? An angel? A dream?"

"All four in a way, and none of the four quite in the way you think," he replied. "The only thing you need to know about me now is that I will be your guide, your teacher. And that I will continue to teach in the only way I ever knew: by questioning. You have chosen to tread this way with me."

I was not completely satisfied with this rather mysterious answer, and I decided to try again: "Another thing, Socrates. I thought I recognized Epicurus too, though I have never met him. I realized that only after we left him and his face appeared in my memory superimposed on the face of another man. Now I know where I've seen him before. He's a dead ringer for Hugh Hefner, the head of a network of playpens in my world. Was that Epicurus or Hugh?"

I was not surprised to receive another mysterious answer: "You assume it was one or the other. How do you know it was not both?"

"Do you mean reincarnation?"

"No, I would not now call it that. I was a wee bit off in my guesses back then. But not wholly off. I would call it *reindoctrination*."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Do you remember, in your Bible, Jesus saying that John the Baptist *was* the prophet Elijah come back?"

"Yes."

"But Jews (and Christians) don't believe in reincarnation, do they?"

"No. So what does it mean, this 'reindoctrination'?"

"Not one soul migrating into two different bodies, but *one philosophy migrating into two different souls*. As John the Baptist thought and taught and did what Elijah did, Hugh Hefner thinks and teaches and does what Epicurus did. The similar faces were mirrors of the similar souls."

"But they lived thousands of years apart."

"This is a philosophical story that we are in," he explained, "and we will confront opposite philosophies at each fork of your road. These philosophies are bodied forth to your imagination in the form of philosophers both ancient and modern. Time and history do not matter now. The same philosophies, the same alternatives, the same choices that you confront in your world, we ancients had in ours."

*Just as they say, I thought: the more things change, the more they stay the same.*

