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Ethics, Epistemology, and Argument amongst the Faculties: A Dialogue

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Ethics, epistemology, and argument amongst the faculties: a dialogue.

Henry Atmore

[Our disputants have been reading and discussing Ian Hacking's seminal Representing and Intervening: Introductory topics in the philosophy of science (1983). The following passage in which Hacking explains his position on pragmatism has sowed dissension between them:

Thus pragmatism branches: there are Peirce and Putnam on the one hand, and James, Dewey and Rorty on the other. Both are anti-realist, but in somewhat different ways. Peirce and Putnam optimistically hope that there is something that sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in. That, for them, is the real and the true. It is interesting for Peirce and Putnam both to define the real and to know what, within our scheme of things, will pan out as real. This is not of much interest to the other sort of pragmatism. How to live and talk is what matters, in those quarters. There is not only no external truth, but there is no external or even evolving canons of rationality. Rorty's version of pragmatism is yet another language-based philosophy, which regards all our life as a matter of conversation. Dewey rightly despised the spectator theory of knowledge. What might he have thought of science as conversation? In my opinion, the right track in Dewey is the attempt to destroy the conception of knowledge and reality as a matter of thought and representation. He should have turned the minds of philosophers to experimental science, but instead his new followers praise talk ^[1].

Porcintal should not be identified with Hacking (and particularly not with the historicist turn Hacking's thought took in the 1990s ^[2]). But he sympathizes with

[1] Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory topics in the philosophy of science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 62-63.

[2] Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004); and *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

the irritation being expressed here. He trained as an industrial chemist - or something along those lines - at a British university in the 1970s but failed rather spectacularly to fit in with the rugby-playing and beer-swilling ethos of industrial chemistry (or whatever it was) in that era. He became a philosopher but does not think philosophy is a reputable vocation. He likes to hang around scientists and make himself useful to them. In his dark moods he worries that he might be turning into a latter-day C.P. Snow^[3]. Squab did his postgraduate work at an august institution and has been descending the rungs of the academic ladder ever since. He is, on paper, terse and elegant in the unexpected profundities he can tease out of Renaissance lyric poems. He likes to cultivate expensive vices, which was easier back in the day, because the vices were cheaper and there were fewer tribunals requiring him to justify his behaviour before them. He envies Stanley Cavell everything except his prose style. Mabcinth is a born mediator and suffers from the ineffectuality native to that species. He is frightened that Porcintal is cleverer than he; he is made a bit doolally by claims to scientific expertise. He can only admire Squab the facility with which the latter shrugs off his social embarrassments. For a man always in search of the middle way, he has made a surprising number of enemies; they suspect that in philosophy as in life Mabcinth expends much energy disguising the fact that his degeneracy is exceeded only by his cowardice.]

* * *

Mabcinth: As I see matters, gentlemen, you are both *thinkers*, people disposed to think, and you are concerned with the general conditions of that activity. What does it do? How should it proceed? How does thought seek out or back into the things that are not thought? You are neither of you solipsists - you would not want to go on with what you are doing if your thinking didn't - how shall we say it, occasionally, fortuitously, necessarily? - land you somewhere unsuspected and unexpectedly ...

Squab: I would say fortuitously. By a happy conjoining with other emergent elements of the universe.

[3] Guy Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature, and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Porcintal: By dint of hard labour and virtuous application to thankless laboratory tasks ...

Squab: You see what makes it so boring talking to this person ...

Mabcinth: The point being, if you'll just stop with that a moment, you are differently disposed to think and your different dispositions give different answers to the questions. Where all this contention comes from need not detain us, we can treat it as a brute fact, although it is probably not a brute fact ... well, not for you, Squab. Porcintal is partial to a bit of ontological roughhousing ...

Porcintal: Outside, now!

Squab: I don't like that because it makes me sound effete. I'm not effete. Where I differ from Porcintal - calm down, there's a good fellow - is that I believe what you, Mabcinth, have just been talking about is a difficulty that needs stating. It's blundersome to engage in the hard work of thinking things through and out without first deciding, in general terms, on what will count as success in this venture. And I don't believe that success in this venture can be defined *a priori* ...

Porcintal: You're skating on very thin ice, my friend.

Squab: ... defined *a priori* in terms of what thought discovers because then the venture wouldn't count as a discovery. Those nineteenth-century agnostics were quite right in what they said about the 'Unknowable' except for the proposition that it couldn't be touched by thought. The unknowable is the only thing that *can* be touched by thought^[4].

Mabcinth: The Donald Rumsfeld model of a justificatory metaphysics.

Squab: I'm going to ignore this unseemliness. Seers have ever been jostled by

[4] Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

militant cadres in the marketplace. It's our lot. The point is that if success in the venture of thought is not to be defined in terms of what thought discovers, then something in the process of thought must be thought's justification. How much easier it is then to go about our business as professors! Because we can just appeal to that utilitarian calculus we all of us carry around embedded deep - coded in our genome; hotwired to taste-buds, gonads, pleasure-receptors of all varieties - and say that the success of the venture of thought is measured in the quanta of delight its practitioners derive from it. We can do a cost-analysis if we like: the pleasure of thought as against the pleasure of blackberry ice-cream, or Charles Mingus, or bedding down with that Romanian hottie from the Art History department ... but no cost-analysis, strictly speaking, is necessary. We live amidst such plenitude. Thinking is not zero-sum, we can do it - *I do it better* - simultaneously with ice-cream, jazz, Art Historians etc

Porcintal: Charles Mingus!!!

Mabcinth: I know, he lost me there too.

Porcintal: 'Quanta of delight' notwithstanding, you seem to think that by stating the difficulty of what you call the venture of thought you have somehow solved it. What thought in this case - and I'll harp on it because it appears to be the main thing you enjoy talking about - what thought backs onto in this case is the statement of the challenge of thinking. I don't see how that isn't solipsism.

Squab: But I need - my theory of pleasure requires - other people with whom to exchange such statements. You should know me well enough to know how much I abhor the 'solitary thinker' - 'the mind in its own place'^[5]. I am even less of an idealist than you, Porcintal. I don't think that mind creates reality because I don't believe - and neuroscience backs me up on this, I understand - that there is such a thing as 'mind'. What is believe in is, yes, exchange, circulation, appropriation, barter - that reality so solid, it is the only thing modern governments feel comfortable taxing, *value-added* ...

[5] Squab is referring to the classic article by Steven Shapin, "'The Mind Is Its Own Place': Science and Solitude in Seventeenth-century England", *Science in Context* 4 (1991), 191-218.

Mabcinth: It was Blake who said we call Nature everything that we cannot tax^[6]

Squab: Which only proves you shouldn't go to Blake for your philosophy. He also insisted there was something wrong in wanting the moon.

Porcintal: What thought backs onto is the 'exchange', as you insist, of statements about the difficulty of thinking? Still looks like solipsism to me. Just because a solitary vice is indulged in collectively doesn't change the character of the vice.

Squab: But it's productive! Meta-epistemology - this is what you're accusing me of, old bean, no don't shake your head and look so thunder-browed - is the template, in its refusal to allow what thought discovers to serve as gauge for the venture of thought, for the only kind of productivity that now *counts*. If we do live in a 'knowledge economy' there can't be any objection, surely, to us brainy people celebrating the fact. Thought is like money, or better, credit - venture capital! what a happy metaphorical extension has just suggested itself!^[7] - it is nothing in stasis, not even the token of a token, attached but to vagrant desire - but set it in motion, a-rubbing against the coin of other people's desires, and those too adrift in a world mysteriously but definitively sensitive to their promptings - and just see what results^[8]! Smartphones. The Clifton Bridge. The accumulated prefaces to The Collected Works of John Ruskin!

Mabcinth: I can't help feeling that you're pulling a fast one here. Offering up holy epistemic innocence in the form of a circumlocution that purports virtue to be lodged in what are, after all, a set of rather vague academic practices, through translocation to a magical faery realm where everybody *has a really nice time* in the book-lined and easy-chaired offices of Professors of Philosophy (with the fold-

[6] Jonathan Roberts, *William Blake's Poetry* (London: Continuum, 2007), 36.

[7] Thinking of Shapin again, less defensibly. For less-than-sufficiently-critical musings on the venturesomeness of modern scientists see *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010). This book has many merits but it fails to live up to the promise of its subtitle.

[8] Squab has recently discovered powerful justification for his vagrancy in Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence; An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

up double-divan tucked away discretely in the corner) - everybody but especially the Professors of Philosophy. As a vision of the good life it has its charms, but I think you should leave the virtue to Porcintal.

Porcintal: Damn right. And you should lay off the ‘rathers’. Everything this guy says is unconditionally baloney.

Squab: You see what I have to contend with?

Porcintal: What, you mean that I’m not *ardent* like you are about filling the world’s silence with speech? So I’m not. I know you’ve extended to me an invitation to join in your ‘conversation’ - and I know that if I do I’ll end up baffled and defeated. There are better, more productive if you will, places for me to be. But announcing my motives for departure is difficult because there is always the danger of some chatterbox answering back before I’ve been able to get out the door. [*So Porcintal departs speedily, spilling coffee in the process.*]

Squab: He’s bolted. It’s a good thing that jacket of his is so cheap. [*Flicks micro-globules of coffee-spill from his own fine-weave frontage.*]

Mabcinth: A somewhat undignified rejoinder to reflexivity, I agree. Don’t worry, he’ll be back. Have you noticed how he’s always talking about how much more fun he has in those laboratories with the scientists centrifuging compacted mouse cerebellums and aiming lasers at vats broiling with liquid potassium - but he never stays long, does he? That bristly head of his soon resurfaces here ...

* * *

Mabcinth: Now, gentlemen, I want us to talk a bit about the ‘conversation’ you, Porcintal, say is going to end in your certain defeat.

Porcintal: You mean you want us to have a conversation about ‘conversation’. Or vice versa.

Mabcinth: That’s quite clever for a confessed taciturn. But I was hoping to

startle Squab into some inadvertencies ...

Squab: A good conversationalist, in my view, is one whose conversation is the route whereby we can fix on whatever it is that is being talked about. Porcintal, I know how much you dislike what you call 'chatter'. And I can see the force of the objection when lodged by a forceful personality. But do we really require any more of these? Haven't they already added sufficiently to the weight of the world's despair?

Porcintal: No, I don't believe they have. I don't see why the pot shouldn't be stirred violently from time to time. There's plenty of complacency needs exploding! But it's interesting you should mention despair because from my perspective you and your fellows must be suffering from it more or less permanently. How can it be other than paralyzing to infer from assumptions about this being how 'I think', that being how 'You think', and those being how 'They think', that all we need to attend to are differences in ways of thinking? To open up, as you fellows like to talk it, spaces in which those differences can be juggled, balanced, settled? Page spaces - spaces between the lines, the words. Where verbal adroitness is all. You must know, I don't see how it can make any difference how welcoming your environments are to sparring with ironies or otherwise negotiating with the creatures you call 'hotties' ...

Squab: The Puritanism resurfaces.

Porcintal: I see no shame in Puritanism. I do see shame in the fashioning of 'discourse' so as to accommodate exploitative predilections in professors of literature ...

Mabcinth: Now then, gentlemen. Stay on message.

Porcintal: As I was saying, you've just got to know that conversation just is not, and certainly not only, what should be going on. You do know this because the best of you whom you quote are appreciative of nothing more than silence. 'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent'; 'We walk around well-wadded against the roar on the other side of silence'; 'On Babel's topple man

unlearnt unblessed babble’^[9]. The abyss into which you’re happy to stare but too cowardly to fall; the mute mass your education has made you unfit to convey elsewhere or its truth to others. You claim the virtues of commerce but you never get your arses out of the library! You have no traffic with silence, mass, motion. And my friends in lab coats that you’re so ready to laugh at and explain their strenuositities away ... Knowing all this, and knowing also that ‘conversation’ is all you are good for, you must be liable to depression. If not you’re stupider than I thought. [*Crashes out of room again.*]

Squab [muttering]: Depression is a danger that must be courted in thinking. A sign that you don’t indulge in it. Nobody so self-righteous could ever be properly unhappy ...

Mabcinth: It’s curious, but although Porcintal likes to present himself as a robust, hearty, commonsensical kind of person, he’s almost always in a rage about something or other.

Squab: He’s a frontiersman. Frontiersmen are constitutionally morbid.

Mabcinth: His self-image requires that he doesn’t broadcast the signals of his findings. He can’t be indiscriminate; he can’t really be *generous*. I talked to him once about the logical positivists and he said that while he admired their rigour he couldn’t relate to their generosity^[10]. The public functions of language discommode him. Conversations of the sort I imagine you and your friends engaging in -

Squab: I prefer colleagues. Too much can be made of our conviviality. It’s not all port and pretzels.

Mabcinth: Colleagues then: the point is that your conversations not only happen in communities, groups, but also are designed - and perhaps this is ultimately

[9] Porcintal is misquoting, one can’t help but feel deliberately, the ending of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and George Eliot’s famous musings on moral stupidity in *Middlemarch*. The Steiner quote doesn’t sound much like Porcintal but it is certainly not by George Steiner.

[10] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Zone Books, 2007).

their purport - to stabilize those communities. Fix them, as it were, as realities the conversations must then also accommodate. Porcintal said he wondered how you couldn't get depressed given what he sees as the disabling limitations of your enterprise. But depression occurs much more naturally in solitaires. It goes with the territory: the territory that is not defined beforehand, that is not staked out, where the boundaries have not been paced, where the preponderating possibility of failure has not been mitigated by consensus ...

Squab: He would also say that what's wrong with me is that my standards of verediction are so relaxed that I can't ever be, in fact, in the wrong. And this does bother me sometimes. But I am far from convinced that he is in possession of a more utile category of error. Temperamentally he doesn't seem to be able to cope with it at all.

Mabcinth: You're weak if you're happy to trade in polite fictions because you think it preferable to the rigour of proof. If you see proof as a species of *violence*. I'm afraid you do talk like that on occasion. But you're strong, and Porcintal is weak in not acknowledging this, in that it takes a lot of work to make such a group demoralized. Nasty work. There is in a way a tenacity to the endeavour of conversation that the endeavour of investigation lacks. The burden of upkeep, being shared, better withstands the efforts of its deniers - whoever they may be. A solitary like Porcintal is more exposed to the whims of agencies that would appropriate or redirect his inquiry. "No job," said William Burroughs, "too dirty for a fucking scientist"^[11]. Not true as a general statement, but capturing the logic of the worldview, pushed to its extreme. History is full of exemplifying cases ...

[Porcintal has come crashing back in midway through this somewhat tiresome peroration. His face is thunderous.]

Porcintal: While history is full of tales of *belles-lettrists* and moral philosophers heroically resisting tyranny. Nasty work indeed.

[11] William Burroughs, *The Western Lands* (New York: Viking, 1987), responding to the destruction of Lawrence, Kansas by nuclear attack in the 1983 ABC TV Movie *The Day After*.

Squab: For once it's Mabcinth who's gotten carried away. 'I'll give you Heidegger if you give me Heisenberg.' It's silly talk. It can puff us up with righteousness but I don't see how it advances any argument worth the having.

Porcintal [mollified]: I'll take that. Except to say that Heisenberg's corruption didn't run so deep as to make him believe in what he knew were impossibilities; while Heidegger's did. When the work runs sufficiently nasty - when there's only one conversation in town and nobody has any choice but to join it - then it helps to have some bedrock. What happens to Winston Smith has troubled many of you not because his conversations with O'Brien are preliminary to torture - but because it's the other way round^[12]. Establish a regime of pain and interlocution can take any form you want. You said before, Squab, that the measure of conversation is delight. I agree up to a point: we need to be thinking somatically on these matters. But you're wrong, dangerously wrong, if you suppose your brand of conversation must necessarily begin or eventuate in pleasure.

Squab: That may well be so. I fear that it might be so. I'd just like to reiterate that it's a dubious test of our philosophies how well they might stand up under tyranny. If the game changes I'd be the first to accept that we have to throw out the old rulebooks.

Mabcinth: I feel I should make amends ... I wanted, at the beginning, to clear some grounds for discussions like this one, and now we're having this discussion, but without having cleared the ground for it. Let's backtrack a little. I'd like to characterize the kinds of thought Porcintal believes *are* robust against 'impossibility' in ways that satisfy and might even go a ways towards advancing Squab's standards of 'conversation' ...

Porcintal: Well, I'm not quite sure what that will prove, but ...

Mabcinth: For one thing, I'm interested in relating your habitual manners of proceeding - your grumpiness, the way you enjoy storming out of rooms, your refusal to visit a hairdresser, the fact that despite being considerably better-funded than either of us, you insist on wearing such appalling clothes - to the mental op-

[12] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 169-188.

erations you valorize. You are inclined to discover epistemic virtue in the inquirer's *getting his or her hands dirty* and you do seem, if you don't mind my saying, to take pains to exemplify this virtue in your own person^[13]. I know that you don't actually spend your time centrifuging mouse brains but you generally look as if you have just left off doing something of that sort.

Squab: I like that. Porcintal as a matter of principle fashions his surfaces so as to dissuade people from inviting him to cocktail-parties.

Mabcinth: Or to return to something you said earlier, Squab, 'the mind as its own place' as a condition for the body's - mark, not *a* body's; *the* body's - engagement with the very stuff of reality. The way that Newton, celibate, solitary Newton, used a spatula to compress the jelly of his own eyeballs; or William Hunter, another decided oddball, injected himself with pus from patients suffering from gonorrhoea ... The age-old association between clear, unmuddled thought and extremes of bodily privation. True philosophies coming only to the coenobitic ...

Porcintal [rising to leave]: Just when I was thinking it couldn't possibly get any worse!

Mabcinth: I'm sorry Porcintal. It's Squab - he has an odd effect on me. Please sit down.

Porcintal: Now that I'm to be accused of sitting atop rocks in deserts lacerating the boils on my shrivelled body with shells^[14] I want it to be a matter of record that my wife is younger and considerably more attractive than Mabcinth's. All my ex-wives as well, God bless 'em. I'd like to say the same about Squab except he doesn't believe in anything so jejune as 'wives'.

Mabcinth: Now you're being silly. I said that you were coenobitic, not that you're a coenobite. And I say this because the thoughts you think - and that, more pertinently, you admire others thinking - are self-consciously strong

[13] Harry Collins, *Tacit and Explicit Knowledge* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).

[14] Job 2.8.

thoughts. Such that the inquirer can reasonably endeavour to hook them onto their subjects in an unequivocal manner through some or other process of verediction. Ideally he/she would do this by him/herself but this is rarely possible in practice because while the standard model for what counts as verediction is simple -

Squab: Not to say simple-minded.

Porcintal: That I particularly resent. Being told how to go about the business of proof by someone who doesn't believe in proof. Who thinks that a statement is successful if it just hangs around unignorably like an unwelcome idiot.

Mabcinth: I didn't say *your* model of verediction was simple, Porcintal. I've listened to you enough times to know that isn't the case, although I must say I would be hard-pressed to explain what *is* the case. What I mean is that the people you admire and want to do justice to generally adopt a rough-and-ready, simplistic, and I think even you would be forced to admit, misleading set of ideas about the form and status of their veredictions. And the problem is that the work they put into verifying one another - or not - is complicated. It can't be done solo. 'Collaborative' is altogether too weak a word to attach to the process by which statements achieve even conditional truth^[15]. Nobody could deny this. But then nobody could deny that the ideal of the mind/body in its own place fits badly, indeed it doesn't fit at all, with the means deployed for judging whether minds/bodies in their places are advancing the inquiry. But putting it so makes people upset because the units of epistemic effort are supposed to be, well, unitary - that's one of the basic features of the standard, wrong, model of verediction ...

Squab: Say it ain't so and you're a fifth columnist. Down that road lies 'groupthink', the *Denkkollektiv*^[16], communism ...

Porcintal [*Squab* has raised a smile at last]: I said before, I don't think such in-

[15] Bruno Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

[16] Ludwig Fleck, *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (1935), transl. T.J. Trenn & R.K. Merton (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979).

ferences are as ridiculous as you seem to think they are. But to get back to Mabcinth, aren't you just talking about the distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification?

Mabcinth [also smiling, with a sense of having been found out]: I suppose I could be. Unlike Squab I'm rather fond of it. But I'd also want to argue that there is a lot more to justification than opening up lines of communication between the solitary in possession of his brilliant idea and the collectivities tasked with putting it through its epistemological paces. That justification is in itself discovery. Not all there is to discovery - some allowance has to be made for thinking being done by and in minds that are not reducible to one another. The denominator isn't always where the action's at. But still, as a wiser man than me has put it, the communicating of knowledge is always also in certain senses the making of it ^[17].

Porcintal: I'm Popperian enough to feel that unequivocal statements attached to unitary authorities delimit a sphere of best practice in which it is possible to fail. If that's a fiction then I have to say it seems to me to be a vital one. If failure is not an option it becomes, well ... the only option in town. Squab's idea is that when the chatter becomes boring - then you should move onto something else. *You* don't even have that standby. 'The communicating of knowledge is also the making of it': are the PR people to inherit even the scholarly earth? Are we to be delivered over to perpetual interactive museum curatorship? Are the mavens of - ?

[Three cellphones sing out simultaneously. Our heroes smile apologetically and delve, not without some relief, into the securitized recesses of Textland. Porcintal is particularly grateful at the interruption. It is a rare person impervious to the shame of being caught in flagrante with 'mavens'.]

Mabcinth [to Squab]: We'd better go. The hiring committee meeting is starting.
[To Porcintal]: We'll finish up some other time ...

[17] Simon Schaffer in conversation with Alan Macfarlane, 27 June 2008. Transcripts are at <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/205060> [Accessed 27/08/2014].

Porcintal: Can't we continue the discussion on the way to the committee-room?

Mabcinth: What, you're coming too?

Squab: But it's a literature position!

Porcintal [savouring the moment]: *Exactly*.

* * *

[*There is tension in the air. Squab and Porcintal are looking daggers at each other. It appears as if one conversation, at least, has gone Porcintal's way.*]

Porcintal: I'm sure she'll be a valuable addition to the faculty. I liked what she said: 'There's no reason why a microbiologist shouldn't be able to teach courses in English literature if in that way inclined. But you could hardly expect a literary critic to teach microbiology.' Got to the pith of something, don't you think? What was the name of that book she's got coming out? 'Mrs Gamp's Cramps'? 'Mr Postgate's Prostate'? Whatever it was, sounded jolly interesting, eh, 'old bean'?

[*But Squab is speechless. Porcintal, musingly*]: Nice legs, too ...

Mabcinth: Apropos of the disaster that has just befallen us, what it demonstrates is how much better *equipped* Porcintal is than we are, Squab. He plays the victim to your Byzantine modalities but he's the one with the institutional heft. Because he's aligned himself with the equipment - the hardware. It's a weakness in conversationalists that in order to do their thinking all they need, basically, is a room, a coffee machine, a few chairs - I think the divan is optional and I agree with Porcintal that you're too eager to advertise your transactions there - perhaps access to a library, although JSTOR has taken much of that work off your hands (or more precisely the hands of your research assistants). While the taciturns with whom Porcintal is leagued think on the sufferance of lending institutions that expect within an elastic but not indefinitely elastic time-frame some return on their investments. They really do think the conversationalists have an easier time

of it - and of course they're right, up to a point. And this *bothers* them; we know it bothers Porcintal. They don't see why everybody shouldn't be subjected to the same time- and money-discipline.

Squab: Whereas from where I'm sitting - not at all in the comfort you two like to imagine - it seems more than a little unjust, given we aren't lent anything very much, always to be paying it back.

Mabcinth: And that's why you fail - like this afternoon, for example. You think it's a virtue for your thinking not to be encumbered by investment opportunity; for all your disquisition upon the valences of 'credit', inwardly you sneer at faculty hobnobbing with venture capitalists ...

Squab: How Porcintal ever squeezes money out of them I'll never know.

Mabcinth: I'm afraid you won't be suffered long to rest contented in your ignorance. The standing insult, under the current dispensation, is to refuse to be indebted up to your scholarly eyeballs. It's weak, I told you, grotesquely weak - for Porcintal and his allies - for you to think naked. For your thoughts not to be bound-up in patents, product specifications, outsourced assays, metrologies, machines ...

Porcintal: Hang on. One minute I'm a coenobite, scratching my pullulating flesh for locust infestations while Squab is lolling under an awning in the *agora* attended by nymphs; now I'm some sort of networked nine-days-wonder, cocaine and snake-oil secreting out of every orifice, a quick technofix for every epistemological disorder, while Squab here is leading a Thoreau-like existence alone with his mung-beans, his ratiocinations, and his jotting-paper. What's it to be, Mabcinth? And don't try to foist on me any of that second-hand dialectic you're in the habit of peddling.

Mabcinth [wearily]: All I was trying to do was explain to Squab that the dual accountability you have come to practice - to a recalcitrant universe on the one hand; to an unforgiving market on the other - gives you an advantage in what one of *our* own has called 'trials of rationality'^[18] - an advantage that is at

present growing ever greater and that we would have to compromise ourselves badly to overturn.

[A change is coming over Squab. This man who never perspires save in private, closed rooms, expensive for the hire thereof, is now damp with sweat. His joints are telescoping with audible pops in outgrowth from jacket and trouser cuffs. A strange glowing dust seems to have settled over the films of his eyes.]

Squab: The devil is come among us, having great wrath!^[19] There shall be reckoning even unto the coffee dispensers! Tallies shall be made unto the last quire of stationary. Secretaries shall be taken thither and assigned to duties elsewhere. And the doctoral students shall go eternally underfunded!

[Hair is sprouting alarmingly from Squab's chin, getting all tangled up in his Windsor knot.]

Porcintal: The beard suits you. I will have to shave mine off. *[Brushes himself free of crumbs and dandruff, preparatory to leaving.]* By the way, can you give me the name of your tailor?

[18] Latour, *Science in Action*, *op cit*, 180-195.

[19] Mr Toobad in Thomas Love Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), ed. Raymond Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 58.