

Dear Theo,

To my surprise, I received another letter from you yesterday with a bank note enclosed. I needn't tell you how glad I was, and I thank you heartily for it. But they refused to change the bank note because it was too torn. However, they gave me 10 guilders on it, and it has been forwarded to Paris. If the bank refuses it, I'll have to pay back the 10 guilders – for which I had to sign a receipt – but if the bank changes it, I'll get the rest later. In your letter you write about the conflict one sometimes has about whether one is responsible for the unfortunate results of a good action – if it wouldn't be better to act in a way one knows to be wrong, but which will keep one from getting hurt – I know that conflict too. If we follow our conscience – for me conscience is the highest reason – the reason within the reason – we are tempted to think we have acted wrongly or foolishly; we are especially upset when more superficial people jeer at us, because they are so much wiser and are so much more successful. Yes, then it is sometimes difficult, and when circumstances occur which make the difficulties rise like a tidal wave, one is almost sorry to be the way one is, and would wish to have been less conscientious.

I hope you don't think of me as other than having that same inner conflict continually, and often very tired brains too, and in many cases not knowing how to decide questions of right and wrong

When I am at work, I have an unlimited faith in art and the conviction that I shall succeed; but in days of physical prostration or when there are financial obstacles, I feel that faith diminishing, and a doubt overwhelms me, which I try to conquer by setting to work again at once. It's the same thing with the woman and the children; when I am with them and the little boy comes creeping toward me on all fours, crowing for joy, I haven't the slightest doubt that everything is right.

How often that child has comforted me.

When I'm home, he can't leave me alone for a moment; when I'm at work, he pulls at my coat or climbs up against my leg till I take him on my lap. In the studio, he crows at everything, plays quietly with a bit of paper, a bit of string, or an old brush; the child is always happy. If he keeps this disposition all his life, he will be cleverer than I.

Now what shall we say about the fact that at times one feels there is a certain fatality which makes the good turn out wrong and the bad turn out well.

I think one may consider these thoughts partly the consequence of overwrought nerves, and if one has them, one must not think it one's duty to believe that things are really as gloomy as one supposes; if one did, it would make one mad. On the contrary, it is reasonable to one's physique then, and later set to work like a man; and even if that doesn't help, one must still always continue to use those two means, and consider such melancholy fatal. Then in the long run one will feel one's energy increase, and will bear up against the troubles.

Mysteries remain, and sorrow or melancholy, but that eternal negative is balanced by the positive work which is thus achieved after all. If life were as simple, and things as little complicated as a goody-goody's story or the hackneyed sermon of the average clergyman, it wouldn't be so very difficult to make one's way. But it isn't, and things are infinitely more complicated, and right and wrong do not exist separately, any more than black and white do in nature. One must be careful not to fall back on opaque black – on deliberate wrong – and even more, one has to avoid the white as of a whitewashed wall, which means hypocrisy and everlasting Pharisaism. He who courageously tries to follow his reason, and especially his conscience, the very highest reason – the sublime reason – and tries to stay honest, can hardly lose his way entirely, I think, though he will not get off without mistakes, rebuffs and moments of weakness, and will not achieve perfection.

And I think it will give him a deep feeling of pity and benevolence, broader than the narrow-mindedness which is the clergyman's specialty.

One may not be considered of the slightest importance by either of the parties, and one may be counted among the mediocrities and feel like a thoroughly ordinary man among ordinary people – for all but one will retain a rather steady serenity in the end. One will succeed in developing one's conscience to such a point that it becomes the voice of a better and higher self, of which the ordinary self is the servant. And one will not return to skepticism or cynicism, and not belong among the foul scoffers. But not at once. I think it a beautiful saying of Michelet's, and in those few words Michelet expresses all I mean, "Socrate naquit un vrai satyr, mais par le dévouement, le travail, le renoncement des choses frivoles, il se changea si complètement qu'au dernier jour devant ses juges et devant sa mort il y avait en lui je ne sais quoi d'un dieu, un rayon d'en haut dont s'illumina le Parthénon." [Socrates was born as a true satyr, but by devotion, work and renouncing frivolous things he changed so completely that on the last day before his judges and in the face of death, there was in him something, I do not know what, of a god, a ray of light from heaven that illuminated the Parthenon.]

One sees the same thing in Jesus too; first he was an ordinary carpenter, but raised himself to something else, whatever it may have been – a personality so full of pity, love, goodness, seriousness that one is still attracted by it. Generally, a carpenter's apprentice becomes a master carpenter, narrow-minded, dry, miserly, vain; and

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whatever it may be said of Jesus, he had another conception of things than my friend the carpenter of the backyard, who has raised himself to the rank of house owner, and is much vainer and has a higher opinion of himself than Jesus had.

But I must not become too abstract. What I want to do first is renew my strength, and I think when it has risen again from below par, I shall get ideas from my work, for trying to overcome that dryness.

When you come here, we shall talk it over. I don't think it's a question of a few days.

In a few days, when I shall have had some more nourishing food than recently, I think I shall get rid of my worst depression; but it is more deeply rooted than that, and I wish I could get to the point where I had plenty of health and strength, which is after all not impossible when one is out-of-doors a great deal and has a task one loves.

For it is a fact that now all my work is too meager and too dry.

Recently this has become as clear as daylight to me, and I haven't the slightest doubt that a general thorough change is necessary. I intend to talk over with you, after you have seen this year's work, whether you agree with me about some measures; and if you agree with me, I think we shall succeed in overcoming the difficulties. We must not hesitate, but "avoir la foi de charbonnier."

I hope they will change the banknote. I'm so glad you have managed to send something, for I think it saves me from illness. I'll let you know how the story of the banknote ends. And it would be a good thing if you could send the usual again by the first of August. I always think that it is possible that we shall hit on another plan for the future when looking through the work together. I don't know what, as yet – but somewhere there must be work which I can do just as well as anybody else. If London were nearer, I should try there.

Know it well that I should be enormously pleased if I could make something that was salable. In that case I should have less scruples about the money I get from you, which after all you need as much as I. Once more many thanks, goodbye.

Yours sincerely, Vincent