

Geometry of Fear

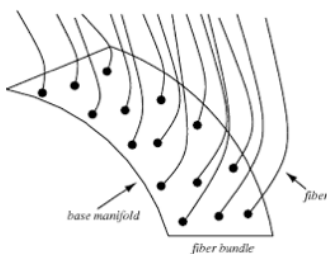


How do these two words get along with each other? Doesn't "geometry" want to domesticate and explain? Doesn't fear resent being put in a cage, like a tiger? Let me start by saying that my hope is that, by the end of the essay, geometry becomes fearful by means of its symmetry. To make some promises about that, let me start with the Möbius band, which gives the tiniest fright. Like an experiment with atomic power, it's safer to start with a small polite cloud chamber than have a test explosion in the Nevada desert.

The Möbius trick is well known. A flat band of paper is twisted and the ends attached so that the two sides merge into one and there is only one edge. The topography of the result always surprises us and we have to demonstrate it by tricking our three-dimensional visual inspection to look closely at a pencil line drawn continuously as we

hold the band flat on a hard writing surface. It's not like the Necker cube, which is just a visual illusion, or the many clever drawings of Escher, where we cannot locate the break line between the "local" connections and the "non-local" image of the whole object, but it does use the idea of local and non-local in a direct way. Locally, we count two sides and two edges, non-locally we must *demonstrate* the reality of one side and one edge. The simultaneity of the two sides of the material paper is our *constructed idea*. The "side" we can demonstrate to ourselves *locally* is really the surface that we must realize, if we realize it at all, be constituted through movement.

Now for the jump. In our local inspection, we look at the band as a surface that has a lot of points, and each point seems to have an obverse, a point "on the other side" of the paper. When we make a drawing we don't normally associate what's drawn on one side with what drawn or left blank on the other side, and if there are drawings on both sides of the paper we don't expect them to be correlated in any way. In the Möbius band, we will encounter a strange correlation, where the points are like twins who are separated forever but are "reunited" when the idea of the twist returns. They never move to the same side the paper strip, but they do "speak about" the twist as we realize the same/different quality of the strip surface. It's like a 1:-1 mapping, a relation of Castor and Pollux, whose starry connection is called the Dokana Gate.



When we imagine a point *on* a drawing surface, we define it as having zero dimensions, yet there are at least three. The point might be a dot, or it might be the *end-on view of a line* that, pointing straight at us, conceals its depth dimension. Like looking at a pencil end-on, we can turn the pencil to see its full length. Any dot could be the end-on view if we are using the paper to represent projective space, and any space "on" or "under" is enough accomplish this. Any dot can be either a point or a line seen end-on.

Other dimensions come from the fact that the dot is a mark. It was *put there* before we see it, so there is a temporality. When we look away the dot will still be there, so there is a durability as well as a priority. The dot is a product of action and subject to other actions; we could erase it.

When we look at the collection of dots and other elements on a representational surface, we look “in” from another kind of space that is exempt from the rules we impose on the making of the representation. We are the readers of a kind of writing. Because we normally fix the writing onto something or, like the stage, physically limit representation within formal space-time boundaries, we regard the writing space in terms of a –1 dimension that we have and it doesn’t have. We can walk away. We can leave the theater. But, before we become too confident in this “freedom dimension,” think of watching a famous play or opera. We hear an actor speaking Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, “To be or not to be,” and we subordinate the actor to the lines. All the actors are mortal props for the idea that Shakespeare drew to connect A to B. We see it “end on” (the actor is facing us) but we are aware of the length it conceals, which we could rotate to diagram the series of times the lines have been spoken on stage. We realize the big difference in *our* dimension of freedom and the line’s concealed dimension. Although it exists only on stages such as this one, it travels back through time, through all of the actors who have spoken it, to the author’s lips when he practiced the syntax and rhythm of the speech. We can “time travel” along this dimension back to 1599. This dramatic point is really a line that is only viewed “locally,” as a dot, end-on.



We can’t really say which is true: can we ignore the dot on the other “side” of the representational surface or must we, when we realize the extra dimensions of the dot, connect the recto and verso versions? The stage example forces us to do something with the line idea, if only to accommodate the normal idea of poetic production, from an author (efficient cause) to an actor (final/material cause), to the audience, where the idea (Content) is realized through Form. When we twist the Möbius band, we also twist the representational space around it. All of the extra dimensions we have to realize as belonging to the point twist around at the same time. So, it’s not just the band that twists, it’s the *space of representation*

twisting, and we have two spaces existing at the same time, the one we stand in to view, in a detached way, the simple twisted strip of paper (or the darkened auditorium where we hear an actor saying “To be or not to be ...”). The Hamlet strip gets twisted, too, when we realize that even Shakespeare alone in his study writing these lines had his own “two sides,” the writer who was the Efficient Cause of the lines and the actor he imagined speaking them, who combined a Final Cause (the written word) with Material Causes (the grammar, vocabulary, understanding of each word’s poetic echoes, as well as the *ink*). Each subsequent actor is a kind of instrumental cause, in the sense that the actor aims to be a perfect conductor (like an electrical wire), of the essence of the speech, although in their material/final cause contribution they hope to “make their mark” in the theater world. They want people to say that they “nailed it!”

There is a muscular component in this construction of a dot that is an end-on view of a line, and part of that muscle goes into keeping the line pointed so that the length is always concealed. In any magician’s simple trick, the end-on view is the audience’s *lack of a dimension* where the magician can move things around, hide rabbits, get the saw to move around the lady in the box, not see the card slip up the sleeve. The lacking dimension must be occulted for the trick to work. Thus, the actor must keep the line pointed straight at the audience’s collective POV to make the moment seem real in the frame of the play. Unless that reality is achieved, the line is not “nailed” into a point, and the point cannot form up with other points

to make the figure. The local must suppress its non-locality. In theory language, we associate this occultation with Instrumental Cause. To draw this discussion to a close for now, let's just say that Instrumental Cause has to be *perfectly* instrumental — the dot has to *perfectly* conceal the line that “may or may not” exist behind it (or in front of it!) so that the representational surface can energize the reality of the virtual space it constructs. If Instrumental Cause is working, then we have a *prismatic* situation where the reader/audience of the representation can be in two spaces at the same time, thanks to the “technical” subtraction of a dimension that, on the side of the representation, is an addition of an occulted pocket space (or time).

fear

Let's use the standard comparison by which Freud and more especially Lacan move from the experience of fear to questions of distance. The three terms are anxiety, fear, and fright. Anxiety is when someone tells us there are tigers in the jungle outside of our hut. Fear is when we hear or see the tiger. Fright is when the tiger is eating us. Anxiety is “in the *indefinite* distance”; fear has a structured distance in which there is still the possibility of escape and we can map the routes; fright is when danger is directly on top of us and there seems little chance of escape. Distance collapses completely. Note that “escape” is the key issue.

We escape when we realize a dimension to things that our pursuer does not realize, or has less access to. Anxiety seems to provide us with a lot of escape routes, and time to think, but there is not enough information. Once we localize the source of anxiety, we can plan our escapes in many different ways, but the problem is that anxiety is hard to pin down, on account of its *non-locality*. *Locally*, we look at the strip of paper; *non-locally*, we imagine it to be a representational surface that puts us in a protected “reading space.” Locality and non-locality are locked into each other. Anxiety, thanks to its non-locality, has this Möbius-band effect. *Our feeling*, the intimate, is correlated with something distant. But, like the vanishing point that keeps moving with every change of our point of view, the correlation between the *object* of anxiety and our feeling of anxiety is 1:1 or, rather, 1:-1. It's the dot on the other side of the Möbius band. Calculate the distance between these two points by drawing a line, and the dot on one side is the antipode of the dot on the other side, but they are only really separated by the thickness of the paper. This is a “mini-max” situation. *Anxiety, which is the most “remote” type of fear, is actually the closest.*

Lacan makes a bold move at this point. He notes this antipodal condition between the subject's feeling and the objective cause and decides to consider that *representation* holds the key to why anxiety is really the most intimate of the trio, closer than fear and even fright. He associates anxiety with a *loss* of dimensionality and materializes this loss *as a screen* that separates the viewer from the viewed and compares it to the screen that separates the writer from the reader, the stage from the auditorium. This surface, as a surface, will divide a space but give one side a *lack*, a loss of a dimensionality, that will be its ability to connect “across” in a non-local way to space-time locations that the readers/audience in their space can only imagine. It is the dimension of occultation that allows Shakespeare to appear “suddenly” — simultaneously, in that the “appearance” of the poet in the spoken lines will be a non-local “epiphany” — in the same way the rabbit is pulled out of the magician's hat “non-locally.”

The frame of the theater allows our (painful) suspense — all our anxious not knowing or being afraid that something is happening — to convert into pleasure of surprise. Think of pleasure (*jouissance*) as a converter machine that crunches all pluses and minus into a neither/nor pile. It's *accumulation* that is the point: *jouissance* takes whatever comes — the good, the bad, and the ugly, so to speak — and converts it

into an accumulation. Once the valence is stripped away, once pleasure and pain are “contronymed,” given the same name, the memory of this accumulation function can be perfect. The only quality left to each new “meme” is its place in the sequence (“take a number”) and its convertibility (it is “given a receipt” for the qualities that have been stripped from it, its “valences” so to speak). Was it a point or a line? We don’t know but the point-or-line quality is preserved. We don’t know whether something made us laugh or cry, but its laugh-or-cry quality is preserved. *Jouissance* doesn’t care which. It is attuned to the multiplicities.

So, when Lacan says that anxiety is the sudden collapse of the dimensions we imagined between us and an ambiguously distant source of danger, he is saying that the collapse (also our loss of escape routes) has preserved, or *memorized*, the losses. This function of *jouissance* has reconfigured two spaces on either side of a surface that can now appear anywhere to construct a “theatrical” relationship, a writer/reader dyad so to speak, where a conventionalized loss of dimensions in one space forces an irrational conjunction of local and non-local conditions. That is, anxiety is modeled as a stage-and-auditorium condition. And, because the surface that separates the stage and auditorium also separates local and non-local, we have a “prismatic” potentiality. The viewer can “attend to” the local (check the program, take a snooze) or give in to the “spell” of the non-local and “occupy” its occulted dimensionality.

This structure of anxiety as a stage/auditorium contronym (combination of opposites) means that threats will always be built into representations “from the start,” that anxiety will be the first *action* of thought, discourse, and the creations we make (novels, plays, buildings, musical compositions, etc.) as well as the tools, especially those tools with defensive functions. Defense can be hidden inside the “ideology” of seemingly harmless utilitarian devices. An SUV is chosen over a car, for example, by a consumer who wants to assure that, in the case of an accident, the *other driver* will be killed, not him/her. Aggression of this kind can exist anywhere a “safety factor” is believed to be in play. Survival is modeled as a zero-sum game: for me to live, you must die. This 1:-1 takes us back to the Möbius band and underscores the claim that if the *object* changes, the space around it changes at the same time. The surface separating stage from auditorium can be miniaturized and carried around, a pocket prism.

The idea that “the object changes the space” is about a logic of reversed predication. I don’t use a fountain pen to write, the fountain pen *uses me* as a *product* rather than a producer of writing. The “I” who emerges from this reverse idea of writing appears only as the writing takes place, not before. The causal arrow reverses; the effect becomes the cause. This is true of all fetish relationships. This is the magic of objects to act “on their own,” to exert magic powers. Without this aura there would be no subliminal marketing of consumer objects that, we are told, *make* the owner into a different kind of subject. More properly, we should say that the object makes subjectification available in specific flavors. We don’t effectively exist as subjects until we come within the aura of the fetish object that has such a power. Take away the objects that define our subjectivity and we lose our place within the Symbolic systems that construct subjectivity. Sell your books, you diminish. Lose your fountain pen and your world can crumble! The object>subject relationship transfers control to a fetishized object world where, if something goes wrong, we feel anxiety that is *ultra-intimate* because we have transferred control and reversed the subject>object “normal” dominance relationship. We have given over the subject-generated dimension behind the dot to the object, converting it into a space of occultation. Behind appearances there are *things* hidden, about which we do not and can not know ... these things create anxiety.

violence



Now it's time to turn to the root of anxiety, fear, and fright: violence.¹ Technically, violence as an action is the physical component, the reaction component. Before violence happens in the modality of fright, we perceive it in the attenuated form of a threat, an anxiety. As it nears (the sounds of bombs exploding nearby) violence is in the mode of fear (we still have escape options). Violence in other words, has the same initial spatial correlations as the sequence as the responses to violence, anxiety/fear/fright. So, the question is: does violence in

its “distant modality” reveal itself to have the same stage/auditorium function, the same Möbius-band problem, as anxiety. Is “violence at a distance” not really “violence that we construct, subjectively, where proximity has foreclosed all possibility of escape”? Do we *stage* violence as being ultra-intimate?

Take a look at an “aftermath” condition, the building that has been blown apart by a bomb. In the sectional cut-away (above), we see a living room with pictures still hanging on the wall, maybe some furniture left, now exposed to the elements. We see parts of a kitchen with possibly a frying pan still containing the food it was cooking at the time of the blast. We can only imagine with horror what the victims experienced. One moment they are concerned not to burn the food, and the next moment, if it can be called a “moment” at all, the blast has made cooking and eating irrelevant. This is a “fourth wall.” It is like the transparent “end-on view” created by cinema, where the set is an imaginary three-sided room and the camera and crew occupy a “fourth wall” space. The camera’s record will give later audiences this same “magical” presence in the lives of imaginary others, in the position of the fourth wall. The violent fourth-wall effect works in perfect reverse. There is no life to see, except that which we imagine retroactively.

The advantage of the fourth wall analogy is that it lets us compare anxiety’s construction of a proscenium separating stage and auditorium and to see how the subtraction and addition of dimensions on either side of that dividing surface might work in the case of violence. We would do well to recall the fourth wall function in movie, *The Truman Show*. A naïve orphan, Truman Burbank, has been tracked from birth, isolated in an island town off the coast of Florida, his life made into a television show. All the other residents are actors in on the game, and their job is to make the fourth wall invisible to Truman. Normally film and television actors don’t see the audience who will later watch them, but in this case Truman doesn’t even see the production apparatus, the cameras or directors. His anxiety is akin to our anxiety, but his “construction of a stage” is both reversed and flipped. He shows how the fourth wall can be almost identical to a Möbius band. He can experience both sides, both spaces, and the internal competition between these experience modalities introduces us to the idea of the “ideal hysteric.” He invents an external position of authority at the same time that external position has made *him* into the stage actor, the source of the “real life” authority that entertains the television audience.

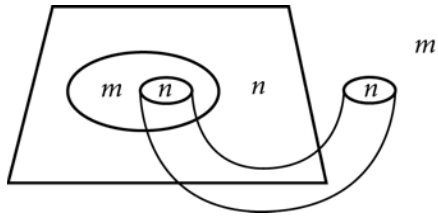
¹ Thanks to Jenan Ghazal and Claudio Sgarbi, both colleagues at Carleton University, for co-sponsoring the question of violence and dimensions. Jenan’s original question cited Eyal Weizman’s contention that violence, as a remote threat, could actually have “started on the drawing board,” i. e. been constructed internally but to appear as external. This inside-outside flip made me think of the Möbius band, and the relation of violence to its subjective response correlate, anxiety (or fear or fright, depending on proximity). We should also look at René Girard’s work!

I will try to limit my use of Lacanian terms, although the *matheme* formula Lacan constructed to describe the Discourse of the Hysteric does in fact twist and flip the *matheme* of modern “everyday reality” (University Discourse). Let’s look at the hysteric’s basic specifications. The hysteric reports feelings of pain, but actually these give the hysteric pleasure unconsciously. A psychoanalyst has to find how the hysteric structures her *pleasure* in order to cure the imaginary pains the patient actually experiences and reports. This is consistent with our understanding of *jouissance*’s ambiguous function as both pleasure and pain — *jouissance* doesn’t care about pluses and minuses, it converts everything into an *accumulation*, a “perfect memory.”

The other thing about actual hysterics is their *relation to authority*, and Truman tells the story here. He attempts to construct his early childhood from pictures and fragmentary evidence. His status as an orphan troubles him. Authority for him requires learning what happened to his parents and why they are absent. He feels that his father is missing rather than dead, and when he accidentally runs into an actor who was mistakenly held over, he pursues him to force out the truth. However, Truman’s paternity is more complex. The director, the enigmatic Christof, is Truman’s “efficient cause” father. Thanks to a suppression of the fact that Truman is always being filmed (the fourth wall is the architectural form of this suppression), the remaining three walls are “hung out in space” viewed by a world-wide television audience, simultaneously amused and horrified by their fourth-wall intrusion into Truman’s privacy. Christof is more than a mortal father. He alludes to the theology of media viewing, the desire for a 1:1 relation of each minute of Truman’s life to the “content” he can create for broadcast.

In Lacan’s *matheme*, there are two “occulted” terms that connect to what we might intuitively associate with occultation in drawing and architecture experience and possibly help us understand their relation to hysteria. What is occulted also serves as a “ground,” both in the sense of a figure-ground relationship and as a foundation. Beneath the hysteric subject, standing as her “truth,” is the plus-minus function of *jouissance*. Beneath the Other the hysteric addresses with her questions is an underground treasury of signifiers, a kind of restricted-access knowledge that works as an accumulation function. This grounds the Other as if it were an *agalma*, something the Other knows but is withholding from the hysteric. In Truman’s case, Christof is the Other who pulls the strings but ultimately has lost the keys to this treasury, forcing Truman to act on his own. His loss, registered as both – and + in *jouissance*’s accounting system, is the dot on the Möbius band, whose antipode is infinitely close and infinitely far. The secret of the twist is held from him.

The fourth wall explains both of these occultation functions. The occulted treasury of signifiers lies invisible beyond the fourth wall, which Truman experiences from all sides. He feels he is being managed in relation to this treasury, and in fact he is right! The eye that watches us from an invisible POV — anywhere and everywhere in *The Truman Show* — is for the hysteric also *accumulating* what it sees, in the same way that Christian children are told that Saint Nicholas is watching them throughout the year, compiling a record of their good and evil deeds, with a view to “settling up” at Christmas eve. This extrapolates to the more general belief in personal accountability over one’s lifetime; in traditional religions, a day of judgment tallies up the successes and failures in the mechanical “weighing of the soul.” This is candid proof of widespread belief in the *accumulator function*, and the relation of /S2 to that function (big words basically meaning that, in terms of the judgment of the soul, we are all Hysterics! This fact is what binds the audience at the emotional level to Truman, and why they are jubilant when he



escapes. He has been “doing time” on the island town of Seaside, Florida, in the sense that he has been playing the role of the deceased who, in “forgetting that he is dead,” travels the interval between a first death and a second death. The momentum that carries the soul forward past the point of literal death (also related to the “death dream” motif in fiction) is idealized by the geometry of

the labyrinth, a meander classically structured by an ABA pattern repeated at two levels:

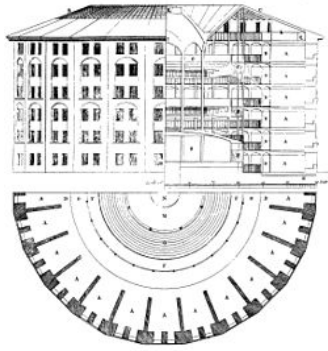
A(aba)B(aba)A(aba). The labyrinth is also an accumulator device in that the pattern never disappears but, at each articulation, proliferates itself by adding new levels. Self-regeneration is what allows fractal structuring to be both inside itself and outside itself at the same time (illustration above). This is the uncanny feeling Truman has about being watched. He is, like the soul ascending from the tomb through ranks of angels, archangels, saints, martyrs, and apostles to join with God, *attended* in this vertical interval. As we know from Dante’s model of the *Inferno*, the attendance of “hosts” of spiritual entities happens whether movement goes down or up.



The theme of violence is present at the interior of the anxiety it provokes, in the form of the fourth wall. Architecturally, the “polite” form of the fourth wall is the section drawing. The “impolite” form is the ruin, such as the bombed apartment house, where the blast has ripped away one face of the interior spaces revealing “that which should not be seen by the eyes of strangers.” This is the function of the house, and generally speaking, of all architecture: to protect the family from the view of strangers. By “family,” the ancients

understood this to be the hearth where the women of the household communicated with the spirits of the father’s dead ancestors. The formula is: violence>fourth-wall>exposure>hearth-violation>gaze-of-the-dead. The fourth wall’s ultimate “horror function” must relate *in kind* to what it threatens, a fourth-wall type of *counter-gaze*. This is etymologically preserved in the relation of hearth-bound ancient religions, originally a function of the family or clan. Vico stresses the importance, in the emergence of family-based religion, of “eyes” opened in the forest — clearings made to view the auspicious signs of the sky and to serve as altars for divinatory procedures. The single eye motif is preserved in Homer’s account of the Cyclops’ cave, where the “single eye” of religion was personified by the single eye of the Giant (Vico characterized the first humans as giants because they were dominated by robust emotions and sensations).

The single eye of the immanent invisible ... that’s *jouissance* in its most potent form, the ocular drive or gaze. The ancients founded their religions on fear of the *gaze* of the dead, and the “eyes” of their hearth-based worship, though geographically restricted to the physical location of the hearth, were extended by the plenum of the sky, the ubiquity of whose elements conditioned the idea that the gaze was anywhere and everywhere. The hearth’s invisible *poché* space was the antpode of the *aether*, the blue of the sky, which Vico defined in terms of the meaning of “heaven” in Latin, *cælum*, both “the sky” and “a wedge” (a contronym). The sky distributed the penetrating wedge of the religious Eye, the origins of the idea that



God is “all-seeing.” The gaze was both the fourth wall as a transparent plenum and the eye that pierced that plenum, the orthogonal legislative and judicial gaze. We can’t help but think of the Panopticon here, Jeremy Bentham’s ideal prison design, where cells were “fitted with fourth walls,” so to speak: open to the view of a tower shielded by blinds that prevented prisoners from knowing when guards were present within. Not knowing when or if they were being surveilled, prisoners had to be “self-regulating” at all times.² The all-seeing single eye means that the gaze is intrinsically a contronymic gaze, a gaze simultaneously aimed in two directions; a “palindromic” gaze. The architectural correlate of this gaze is the fourth wall of cinema, the principle of narrative in fiction, and the section drawing of architecture. It is the violent removal of the wall protecting interior space from the view of strangers.

Concluding a bit short of our mark, let me propose a radical conclusion to this chain-of-consciousness tour from anxiety to the self-regulating gaze of the Other. Occultation of *jouissance* and unconscious knowledge as *agalma* reveals how the fourth wall “idea” — violence of intrusion — is built into perception and representations of perception from the start. Violence of the fourth wall is equal to the cut of the picture plane, *inherently* a section drawing even made through the perspectival cone of vision. The section removes the fourth wall but it is simultaneously the threat and response to the contronymic gaze. The symmetry of these relationships point to the discourse of the Hysteric. The full meaning of this is revealed by the formal *matheme* that Lacan has used to reveal the way the hysteric structures knowledge. This is not knowledge in the form of authoritative information but, rather, as knowledge in the role of *production*, a sublated or occulted knowledge that informs and structures without being “known” in any conscious way. On one hand knowledge works as an “accumulator function” that retains everything perfectly — the model of the unconscious. On the other hand, this hysterical knowledge communicates its mandates in the form of contronymic truths — revelations that have an ironic/double value. Many errors result from the failure to recognize the contronymic element, as in God’s characterization of wisdom as the knowledge of good and evil. This is not the wisdom enabling one to make a choice between doing the right thing or the wrong thing, but the knowledge of the contronymic of divinity, the good-*and*-evil aspect. “External” violence is feared because anxiety structures inner resistance, by which violence is necessitated.

² Michel Foucault, in his famous treatment of this prison design, insisted that the gaze traveled from the central tower to the prisoner’s cells, penetrating their fourth wall. While this is literally true, he failed to note the contronymic nature of this gaze. It was because the prisoners looked at the tower *and saw nothing* that the imagined gaze from the tower that surveilled their most intimate activities came into being. The gaze, as Lacan famously outlined in his *Four Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, is reciprocal with the “look,” but specifically the look that sees nothing. In this way, the world we look at becomes uncanny in that it looks back at us, *via* a portable fourth wall construct. Ancients, in their naïveté, fashioned this as the sky and correlated it with the “eye,” the clearing in the forest where their singularized their worship around the absolute authority of dead ancestors. Funerals have optionally related to earth or sky, burial or cremation; and it must be the contronymic relation of death to darkness or light, and the parallel contronymic relation of darkness and light themselves, that determines this authority function. Wherever you see a contronym, you are also seeing *jouissance* as the “inverter gate” that refuses to acknowledge the binary of negation. It cannot recognize differences between the good and the bad, the dead and the living, the upper and the lower. When God forbade Adam to taste of the fruit that would give him “knowledge of good and evil” the real meaning was that he would have knowledge of the contronym, good-*and*-evil, and God’s relation to that contronym, which was first famously exposed in the parable of Job.