



A REPORT TO AN ACADEMY
JAMES F. CONANT

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The facts about what, when, and where?
Fellow, Berlin, Institute for Advance Study.
Office: N-32. Apartment: 353.
The date? The time?
Fall 2008 to Summer 2009: a full year.
Such facts are easily told.
What did I learn then and there?
That's less easily disclosed.

Journalist, biologist, TV star, ping-pong shark,
and many other kinds of hat
are all worn by a single funny brilliant German guy.
He's named Axel. Did you know that?
That smack-dab in the Panama Canal is a park?
And that in it equally varied sorts of expert fly,
by surfing a sound wave through the darkest of the dark,
each a different kind of bat?

Well, now I do, and ever so much more.
Some of it: quite an unpleasant surprise!
For instance, would you have believed
that self-deception is selected for,
and that's how fitness is achieved?
To you this may just sound like lies. All lies!
But at least you now know the reason why.
It's because you're so self-deceived.

Most Fellows have their one preferred frame
for playing the explanation game:
Each keen to show just how far he can go with his point of view.
One sort claims to know that it is merely about history:
“Some beliefs help us muddle through a historical situation
and they are the ones we call ‘true’ if we occupy just that station.”
My dear friend, if this strikes you as a bit of mystery,
don’t offend by whispering: Sir, is this true for *that* statement, too?

As we have already seen, another is no less keen
to claim that one’s make-up is a selection
of the dregs and the cream of a certain mix of genes.
Here, too, do not be so very mean
as to make him take up the vexing question:
Sir, are you attracted to this scheme
for explaining the nature of being
because *you* have a certain gene?

Some things never become clear:
How can a brand spanking new species
simply come out of nowhere?
How can certain events have no cause?
How can one scholar’s warmed-over feces
receive the same amount of applause
as another’s deftly proven theses
showing the limits of certain laws?

Now you tell me: how can it possibly be
that a blind person can draw perfectly
what he or she cannot ever even see?
And, very strange though it may seem,
there's only one potential Queen.
And every wasp throughout the colony
knows exactly who she is: that only she
can secure their collective allegiency.

That everyone should understand,
except the one happening to be me,
simply appeared part of the plan
executed so magnificently.
Which is why I have not told you yet
the things you are itching so to know:
Those answers you think you need to get
to decide if you, too, want to go.

Will I be fed?
And get a bed?
Can I bring my cat?
Is it like a penal institute?
Or a Club Med?
Will I be shot at?
Will I sometimes also get to shoot?
Will it leave me rich or destitute?

And may I say what I think
if I promise not to shout?
And may I think what I say
if I promise not to blink?
May I sometimes go away
if I promise to sign out?
Even over a Tuesday?
How long till one learns one's way about?

Is this place really along *my* line?
Will it come to feel like home?
Might it surprise me from behind?
Or will it just hurt?
Fit me like a glove?
Or like a hair shirt?
It may surprise you from in front,
like falling in love.

Does Advanced Study name an end?
Perhaps otherwise attained only in our dreams?
As in, say, Institute for World Peace?
Or does it refer instead only to a means – a mere heuristic?
More like an Institute for Nuclear Warhead Ballistics?
To an upwardly tending trend – itself adding to the statistic?
Or to a rare blend of all of these – an exotic mix?
Such as in Institute for High Energy Metaphysics?

What *is* Advanced Study?
A transition to the clear
from the muddy?
Or the reverse?
An exercise in the severe?
Or the cuddly?
An exploration of the profound?
Or the perverse?

Can you get there from here?
Is it supposed to be fun?
Or more like a lesson in fear?
Or to stun: like a lesson in love?
Do you lose or find your way?
Having been there a year,
I am now inclined to say:
Typically, all of the above!