

What is called awkwardness?

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Towards the end of 2013, I went to a concert with a then-ex, a meeting that surprised me with how smoothly it went, all things considered. After the concert we went to a cafe and talked briefly about a conversation she had been having, about whether it is possible to speak of awkwardness—and specifically an awkward *situation*, rather than a feeling of awkwardness—in German. I assumed that some such feat must be possible and set about, after we'd parted, trying to find out the answer. I recruited informants who spoke the language natively, as did she; their responses were at variance with each other. (One of them made the good distinction, however, between feeling clumsy in a given situation—*unbeholfen*, said she—and not knowing how to behave in a given situation: *verlegen*.) At one point I sent along the illustrative quotations for one of the candidate words meant to capture the sense of English “awkward”—I believe it was *peinlich*—and met with a somewhat unexpected response: while I had thought that the sentence did describe an awkward situation, the others disagreed. Another word, *fremdschämen* (roughly embarrassment on another's behalf), seemed to capture aspects of the concept, or something closely related, but only when considered in itself: set alongside *peinlich* the two seemed to be pertain to different phenomena entirely. And then there were *unbeholfen* and *verlegen*.

It's not really surprising that a single word in one language might be used to express multiple concepts, each of which gets its own word in another language. Looking at that other language will then reveal the disunity lurking under the cover

of the single word in the first. What's striking to me about all this, however, is that everyone started off apparently thinking they knew what awkwardness was, and the only question was about expressing that very concept in German. But as the conversation went on there was just as much a puzzle, to me anyway, about what awkwardness is in the first place. We disagreed about specific examples, and while there wasn't much explicit theorizing I doubt anyone involved could have come up with a theory that would have commanded the assent of the others. The investigation could only end in perplexity.

This perplexity was, happily, just the spur required to get me finally to purchase and read Adam Kotsko's *Awkwardness*, a guide to the subject forming the first part of his soon-to-be-completed pop culture trilogy. I knew, sort of, what to expect: awkwardness would turn out to be (the experience of?) a breakdown in (the experience of?) the normal course of social interactions (which makes that normal course, invisible when things are going right, more apparent), and this would be analyzed, or used to analyze, or be a guiding theme in the discussion of, several television series and movies.

I was hoping for an analysis that would address the apparent variety, the dissonance, that I had encountered, either showing the disparate phenomena to be tractable by one and the same account, each being a form of some one phenomenon, or explaining why only one really merits the title "awkwardness", or is at least the central form, or some such resolution.¹ What, after all, is called awkwardness? We say that a particular person is awkward, or a particular event. We say that we feel awkward, sometimes apparently meaning ungainly or clumsy, sometimes apparently merely ignorant. We feel awkward as participants, and as observers; we feel awkward observing situations whose more direct participants may not feel awkward at all. As actors or observers intentionally created discomfiture, sincere

¹I'm willing to set aside as definitely non-central—or even, to use a significant term in these contexts, etiolated in some fashion—such uses as calling *facts* or *positions* awkward, as in "so-and-so's argument overlooks the awkward fact that . . . , leaving him in an awkward position.", and even to overlook such uses as I suspect were the origins of our current, social/psychological uses of "awkward", referring to *physical* positions or maneuvers, though they may well provide clues for our investigations.

ineptitude, and oblivious boorishness can all generate the feeling of awkwardness. What makes a situation awkward, or makes for the feeling of awkwardness? Who is the subject, who the bearer of awkwardness? For whom is the awkward situation awkward?

I'll lay out right here my some of own opinions (quite influenced by Kotsko's) on these questions: the subject of awkwardness is someone who is, or is contemplating, acting, and it is awkward for that person. What makes for awkwardness is harder to sum up in brief, but it's something like the feeling that nothing one does is or could be right, whether because one just can't carry it out correctly, or because it's unclear what what carrying it out correctly would even be, combined in such a way with the sense that one has to do it *anyway* that the ongoing progress (or thought thereof) constantly hovers before one's mind. (Awkwardness is an ill, to the extent that it is an ill at all, of the highly self-monitoring.) I throw my lot in with *unbeholfen*, as regards translation into German.

How does Kotsko answer these questions? One could imagine *Awkwardness* proceeding as an Aristotelian treatise, starting with the various *endoxa*, the things popularly believed about awkwardness, which may be in disharmony with one another, followed by systematized observations yielding a single account, correcting and explaining the appeal of the popular conceptions. Part of the point of such a procedure is first to explicitly acknowledge that there is a, or are several, general working understanding(s) of the phenomena, and set them as objects of evaluation alongside the phenomena—bringing them to the fore in an attempt to avoid implicitly relying on them.

What we get in the initial chapter, the one most directly concerned with describing awkwardness itself, is something else: descriptions of a few hypothetical situations (one is drawn from life, but for the reader that can make little difference) and a few scattershot observations, following which we're off to the races. This is a shame, not least because the situations described can be further characterized in ways that seem to actively conflict with, or at least not support, the characterizations Kotsko does offer. And in the absence of a wide-ranging engagement

with the ways the different situations he entertains—and the different situations he doesn't entertain!—might play out, the reader is thrown back on her pre-existing, rough-and-ready understanding of awkwardness both in the initial chapter laying the analytical groundwork for what follows and in its sequels. I suspect that it's because of this that the concept becomes surprisingly labile in later sections of the book, with phenomena described as awkward whose relationship to Kotsko's positive remarks is at best obscure.

That may seem a harsh judgment, so my attempt to back it up will be fairly long. (“Detailed” would be the nicer way to characterize it.) I'll try to say something positive about awkwardness in the second half, sketching an alternate conception, albeit one that doesn't differ greatly from what I *think* Kotsko is after. But before getting there, I must first descend into the weeds, working with two descriptions Kotsko gives. The goal here is to get deep into the text in the first, most important section, so I'll occasionally quote at length.

First:

A pub that I frequent has a “live Irish session” on Sunday afternoons . . . One day . . . the instruments fell silent and a woman began singing *a capella* in a vary dramatic, drawn-out, vibrato-laden style. She had had no role in the proceedings up to this point, as the music was entirely instrumental. She had apparently just been another patron sitting at the bar . . .

The social tension that accompanied this performance was, *for me at least*, nearly unbearable. How, I wondered, should I handle this? [Various possibilities are considered and dismissed as only exacerbating the awkwardness, if that's what it was.] . . . if this sudden outburst of *a capella* singing had occurred on the train . . . I would at least be within my rights to ask the person to stop. Here, all I could do was quietly endure. (4–5; emphasis added)

Kotsko immediately makes the point that “our usual way of speaking about awkwardness doesn't clarify things. We might just as easily say that I feel awkward, that the singing is awkward, or that the situation as a whole is awkward” (5).²

²He continues: “It's as though awkwardness is continually on the move, ever present yet impos-

But whether it's really just as easy to do any one of these as any of the others will depend a great deal on the comma-bound concession, "for me at least". Perhaps she's a regular who does this frequently, and everyone else knows and tolerates her and her singing—perhaps they are even fond of her. Kotsko doesn't know this, not having been a patron long enough; consequently *he* finds her singing odd and off-putting and doesn't know how to behave or what's going on. Fleshing out the situation thus, would we really prefer to say that the singing is awkward, rather than that Kotsko feels awkward? Especially given that the description has solely to do with his sense of there not being any good way for *him* to act? (He says he wondered how to "handle" the situation—but why does it need handling at all?)

He draws two general lessons from this example. There are "two modes of awkwardness". The first is everyday awkwardness, "which seems to originate with particular individuals" and "combines aspects of [his] gracelessness and the singer's uncomfortable performance" (6);³ it involves a violation of an unspoken social norm. The awkward person is the one who "does something that is inappropriate for a given context" (6). The second is radical awkwardness, which reigns "when there doesn't seem to be any norm governing a given situation at all . . . in place of seeing one's familiar ways of navigating the world flaunted, one feels deprived of them altogether" (7).⁴ Summing up, "there exists a certain norm that,

sible to nail down. The etymology of the word confirms this impression of movement: the *-ward* of *awkward* is the selfsame *-ward* as in *forward* or *backward*" (5–6). But the etymology doesn't confirm *this* impression of movement; it confirms that there is, originally, an element of movement, in particular of wrong, gangly, or clumsy movement, to awkwardness. It doesn't confirm that *awkwardness itself* is "on the move".

³In keeping with our previous question about the subject of the awkwardness, we might here ask whether Kotsko hasn't just described the same thing twice. Is the singer's performance uncomfortable in itself? Or is *he* uncomfortable with the performance? A question with relevance to the sociality of awkwardness.

⁴I'm not sure how different the two can really be, given these characterizations. For if we *knew how to respond* when a familiar way of navigating the world was flaunted, we could just respond that way, and where, then, would the awkwardness lie? Surely it is because once the initial trespass has taken place we no longer know what to do—no norm governs there—that it has the power to induce awkwardness. Kotsko acknowledges something like this later—"if the social order really did have a regulation prepared for every encounter, awkwardness would never occur in the first place" (16).

though most often not explicitly stated, is regarded as both knowable and in fact known by all members of a given community. Awkwardness is then related to this stable norm as its opposite or violation” (7).

The second example is supposed to illustrate radical awkwardness:

[W]hite midwestern Americans who meet someone who doesn’t speak English will often attempt to make themselves understood by speaking more slowly (or worse, loudly) . . . in the process making their more enlightened peers feel awkward because of their gauche behavior. (8)

Perhaps we can make this more vivid by imagining a tourist clad in his traditional costume of loud Hawaiian shirt with a ceremonial camera on a strap around his neck. You, one of his more enlightened peers, have somehow wound up on a tour with him, and now must witness him incompetently haranguing a hapless vendor. Here we are supposed to have a clash of norms, neither winning out over the other, rather than the simple absence of norms,⁵ and the effect the boorish behavior has on his peers illustrates the fact that both forms of awkwardness exhibit

A fundamentally *social* character. Awkwardness moves through the social network, it *spreads*. You can’t observe an awkward situation without being drawn in: you are made to feel awkward as well, even if it is probably to a lesser degree than the people directly involved. . . . In my example [of the pub] . . . it was possible for awkwardness to spread, for instance if someone had walked in unsuspecting and been stopped cold. This property of awkwardness comes out perhaps most clearly in Ricky Gervais’ original *Office*—the fact that it is so painful to watch confirmed once and for all that awkwardness can spread even by means of television. (8)

Since the subsequent chapters are concerned with television and movies, this trait of awkwardness is methodologically rather important. But it’s supported by what strikes me as a rather thin reed.

⁵Why any of these should be thought of as an apt description of the situation is not clear to me. Is there really no norm against treating those who don’t speak one’s language in the way described?

How is the awkwardness supposed to be spreading, after all? Is the idea that the hapless newcomer to the pub gets her awkwardness from Kotsko, and the next person gets it from her? That would fit with the idea of “moving through the social network”. But surely it’s as likely—more likely—that such a person would find the situation in the pub awkward as a result of encountering, well, the situation in the pub, the singer and all that. If each person encounters that situation alone, atomically, we haven’t got a case of *spreading through a network* at all. And that’s not an unreasonable supposition. I have been in situations not unlike the one Kotsko describes, frequently on public transit. (I have never, in such cases, felt particularly comfortable asking the people making random outbursts of song to stop, perhaps because they seem to be—in part because of their socially bizarre behavior!—generally unwell.) One gets used to it, but there remains an element of wondering: *should* I say something? Should I even *acknowledge* this? Or pretend to be so absorbed in my book that I don’t see it? It’s awkward, I suppose; at any rate, it makes for tension. And in general I get this awkward wonderment by encountering the person acting unusually. If others are involved, their role is to direct one’s attention to the person encountering whom creates the awkwardness.

Indeed, a connection with another person does not, in my experience, spread the tension; it relieves it. Each person, feeling awkward in his own world, wondering what should be done or if anything should be done, finds in the other not a heightening of that feeling (as if, perhaps, knowing that the other recognizes that you are wondering about what to do increases the sense that you really ought to be doing something) but a release, as when, confronted by something that seems strange—but you aren’t sure—you ask, and receive an affirmative answer to, the question “this is weird, right?”. Even though you are no closer to action, the acknowledgement that you are not alone in your awkward befuddlement goes a long way to resolving the feeling that something perhaps *ought* to be done, only you don’t know what, and you can go back to just, well, doing something.

Here’s another potential explanation of the putatively special social spread of awkwardness. Kotsko begins the section headed “Awkwardness and philosophy”

thus:

So awkwardness is not a property of a situation that could be objectively observed as though from the outside—if you are observing awkwardness *as* awkwardness, then you are drawn into the awkward situation itself. At the same time, the spread of awkwardness makes it seem different from an emotion, which we normally think of as being located somehow inside an individual. (9)

One infers from the “so” that the claim is supposed to follow from the preceding—though I confess myself uncertain how anything that comes before speaks to the supposed non-objectivity of awkwardness. So perhaps we can consider “observing awkwardness as awkwardness” as a mechanism for the spread. Then we have to give some content to this locution. A plausible candidate for observing awkwardness *not* as awkwardness is looking at a situation that is awkward to some observers or participants, and not recognizing that it’s awkward. (Though “not recognizing that it’s awkward” is going to be a tricky thing to get straight, if part of the point is that awkwardness can only be recognized from the inside. Perhaps we should say that it’s the absence of seeing anything awkward about the situation, and leave the issue of *recognition* to the side.) Then “observing awkwardness as awkwardness” would mean seeing an awkward element in the proceedings, and the claim would be: you can’t see the awkward element without some affective response; there’s no *uninvolved* assessment: yes, that’s awkward.

If that were so, though, what would we make of the person who “often cause[s] awkwardness, but . . . does it intentionally for his own enjoyment” (36)? Surely this recognizable type, who behaves in such a way as to unbalance his counterparties, and relishes their disorientation, observes awkwardness as awkwardness—that’s why he does it—yet does *not* get drawn into the situation as awkward: he’s in control; the other person is the one who flounders. (So this person is not like “the audience members [who] intentionally subject themselves to awkwardness due to its humor value” (36–7), since they *do* partake of the affect of awkwardness—that’s the whole point of observing its apparent spreadability via television. And

cause for wondering whether they partake on purpose for its *humor* value, precisely. It's not the same humor value that one gets out of, say, Tati's *Play Time*.) We might also consider his opposite, the compassionate person who sees an awkward situation as awkward and defuses it, lessening the awkwardness—or trying to, anyway—for the ungainly in action, disoriented person who *is* experiencing the situation precisely *as* awkward, without being drawn in and experiencing the affect of awkwardness. (A reminder that while we can't be prepared for every eventuality, one of the eventualities that *some* of us are prepared for is the emergence of awkwardness.)

The American-abroad example raises further questions both in this connection—spreadability—and as regards the idea that the norms involved in awkwardness are “knowable and in fact known”. Observers feel awkwardness, albeit “to a lesser degree than the people directly involved”. But do the principals feel awkward *at all*? The boorish tourist presumably doesn't, or if he does it's just because he can't get his intentions across—but it's the other guy's fault for not knowing English, recall. The buttonholed vendor could feel awkward, I suppose, but it does not strain the imagination to suppose his thoughts to be something like: “Christ, another one of these assholes”. The *primary* locus of awkwardness is the observer; no spread here, either, at least not yet. (Kotsko says that awkwardness does not isolate (15),⁶ but if everyone else in this little scene is as boorish as the person speaking louder and slower, it easily could.) And there's no suggestion that the norm is known by the boorish American (though perhaps he simply doesn't belong to the given community?); his ignorance, in fact, is part of the problem. Catching the eye of a fellow sophisticate and commiserating over the scene together might count as drawing another in—but as noted, that might also relieve the tension. (Is this the “weird kind of social bond” (9) Kotsko mentions? I don't think so, because this

⁶He denies it isolates the person experiencing it on the grounds that it spreads through the social network, but this seems to paper over a distinction between two ways in which someone might be isolated. If awkwardness does indeed spread, then an awkward-feeling person is not isolated in that there are others who feel the same way—he or she isn't an isolated case. But all of them could feel isolated in their awkwardness simultaneously.

isn't, as far as I can see, a case of awkwardness spreading socially.)

If the locus of the awkwardness here doesn't lie with the exchange the principals are having, then there's a bit of a question about what *makes* it awkward for the observer. It's not a matter of something like *empathy* with one of the parties, since (we are assuming) neither of them feels awkward—not in the way that the onlooker does. Nor is it obviously “a breakdown in our normal experience of social interaction” (15) since the onlooker isn't a party to *that* interaction.

“Ah”, one might here think to point out, “but the onlooker is a *witness to* and possible *intervenor in* the action, and suffers from a lack of a script for what to do *there*.” This is on the right track, certainly; what's awkward for the observer isn't the contravention of a norm by the actors observed, but the simultaneous senses that he ought to intervene, and that there is no correct or practicable way for him to intervene, so that whatever he does, he runs the risk of discovering or revealing a gulf between him and everyone else. (I don't want to say that the issue is that there's no norm governing how he ought to intervene for reasons I'll get to later—basically, the norm wouldn't necessarily help anyway—but that isn't a bad first cut at what's going on.) But there are a couple of things worth pointing out about this.

First, a person watching television is neither of those things, actually or potentially. If explaining the onlooker's feeling of awkwardness requires her to actually contemplate courses of action she might actually undertake that would affect what she observes, then cringe-inducing television would seem to be *another* phenomenon. (Not to dismiss the gigantic literature on emotional responses to fiction, drama, etc. But our reactions to what's depicted on stage or screen are not always (I would guess, are rarely) in line with how we'd react if we were actually present.) One might even speculate that the awkward cringe is *primarily* a phenomenon of the detached, uninvolved and uninvolvable spectator, exemplified by the television watcher, and only secondarily something that happens in real life.—A breakdown in our “experience of social interaction” where the experience is that of the spectator; that isn't what we're used to *seeing*. (Often in such television, however, there is a focalizing character for whom things do feel awkward.)

Second, there's another explanation of the phenomenon that doesn't require the onlooker to even want to act, or want to act to intervene, anyway. One of my German candidates for translating the concept of awkwardness was *fremdschämen*, roughly feeling embarrassed or ashamed on behalf of another, and that seems apt here. The boor is doing something that he *ought* to be ashamed of; he isn't, not because he's shameless but because he does not even recognize what he's doing as being the least bit wrong. The more enlightened onlooker witnesses both the shameful behavior and the ignorance, and feels for the boor what the boor cannot feel for himself. (There could be—but needn't be—a self-protective element, as well, a desire to act so as somehow to make clear that the onlooker isn't *also* a boor, is different from her counterpart in this respect.) The onlooker's thought may be something like: I would be deeply ashamed/embarrassed to be going what that person is doing, and that person *doesn't even realize* that what he's doing is wrong, which would make me even more ashamed/embarrassed (a paradoxical thought), and it just *keeps happening*. Perhaps watching makes you feel like a participant; in any case, watching is unendurable. If this is what's going on when watching comedies of awkwardness on TV, then it may indeed be a separate phenomenon from the awkwardness experienced by the observer and would-be participant. I think this *is* a large element of the cringe associated with *many* comedies of the relevant sort on TV, and is a phenomenon separable from feeling awkward when faced with the question how, or whether, to act.

As far as I can see, the analysis of awkwardness as something that spreads socially, creating a community of the awkward (rather than isolating those who experience it), founded primarily on the violation, or absence, of social norms, simply does not capture the phenomenon. I think, too, that Kotsko implicitly recognizes this, and that this recognition underwrites his willingness to call "awkward" things that do not seem to fall under his official account at all. For instance, he remarks that an African-American family on *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is "awkwardly named the Blacks" (84). What, precisely, is awkward about this?—well, perhaps you're introduced to Loretta Black and have, for some reason, to keep yourself from saying

something like “how appropriate!”. Your difficulty keeping yourself from violating a norm, however, is not any fault of the *name*, and most of us, I think, would be able to handle it fine, just as most of us past middle school can keep ourselves from laughter when a Richard introduces himself to us as Dick. Or, discussing Apatow’s heroes, Kotsko remarks that

[O]ur hero supposedly already *has* come of age, already is an adult. There is therefore something inherently awkward about the hero, an awkwardness that can only be abated by keeping to his circle of fellow overgrown adolescents as much as possible. Yet . . . the strategy for avoiding awkwardness only winds up compounding it, as limited contact with the “normal” adult world leads the overgrown adolescent to underestimate the strangeness of his lifestyle. (54)

But if our hero *does* keep to his circle—to his society!—and acts in accord with the local norms, everything ought to be fine. Sure, the squares may not understand, but who cares about the straight world anyway? (And in real life, those pursuing unconventional lifestyles often *can* cope with the normal adult world pretty well, and many parts of the normal adult world can cope pretty well with the unconventional. One can’t just move back and forth from Apatow to actually existing reality as if each mirrored the other.) Perhaps they are standing violations of some social norm, but it’s not, evidently, a norm they endorse. Wearing a mohawk doesn’t make a person inherently awkward because it would be out of place in a white-shoe law firm. (For something that is supposedly social by nature, an awful lot of things are said to be “inherently” awkward.) Later, and still more puzzlingly given his official account, Kotsko writes about “the awkwardness implicit in adolescent homosocial friendships” (64). The awkwardness of the overgrown adolescent came, apparently, from his being *overgrown*; the adolescent adolescent is grown just right. Certainly adolescence is an awkward period. But it’s hard to see, given what Kotsko says about the nature of awkwardness, what the special implicit awkwardness of same-sex friendships among adolescents might be. This is not to say that there might not be such an implicit awkwardness—only that it is not ex-

plained what it is or how it relates to awkwardness as theorized in the opening chapter.

Here's a final example, something that really *is* potentially quite awkward, but not, I think, very well accounted for by Kotsko's official theory, and something that is, in itself, quite fruitful for examination. Still in the Apatow chapter, Kotsko describes a supporting couple in *Knocked Up* thus: "both partners, then, are trying to avoid the awkwardness and unpredictability of direct and open communication with each other, Pete by constructing a contentless distance and Debbie by laying down the law" (60). Direct and open conversation can be awkward for both participants; some things are difficult to reveal and to have revealed, and one can easily not know how to go about it or find that one's words come slowly, consistently feeling wrong. (As if one were attempting to perform some tricky physical maneuver after just getting out of a cast.) Again, I'm not sure that the awkwardness that can come from this kind of openness is best accounted for in terms of violations of norms (open and direct communication is represented as an ideal for couples to attain to, for one thing, even if doing so is uncomfortable at times). So what *does* make it awkward? How might we better account for awkwardness? What's so awkward about direct communication?

In the case of the boorish American the awkwardness, whatever the analysis, can be traced to the violation of a norm that the onlooker, at least, thinks should be heeded, such the the onlooker wishes to intervene, but that need not be the case in general—if we're thinking of ungainliness in (potential) action it requires only that the potential or actual actor not know quite how to go about what she wants to do; if it involves embarrassment on another's behalf, anything embarrassing or shameful in the onlooker's eyes could do the trick. Social norms might enter into such things in a variety of ways:

1. Doing the thing in question might involve violating a social norm.
2. It might be in accord with a norm that pretty well charts how one ought behave in carrying out the thing.

3. It might be in accord with a social norm, in that there's a norm prescribing actions of that type, without necessarily saying how in particular to perform them (the way norms of etiquette, for instance, can get into the nitty-gritty of what precisely to do), at least as far as the potential actor knows.
4. It might be totally hunky-dory norm-wise, but just something the potential actor is not comfortable doing.
5. It might be open territory, actions of that sort being neither demanded nor prevented by any norm, with no norms other than the most general for how we interact with others offering guidance, at least as far as anyone involved knows. In which case:
 - (a) that might be no big deal, or
 - (b) there might be a felt need for some such guidance.

Even in the second case one can still feel awkward, either as a principal or as an onlooker. Knowing the gross details of what one ought to do, and the fine details of how one properly carries it out, is no guarantee that one will not feel clumsy, or silly, or bungling, or as if one is, somehow, doing it all wrong, while *actually* carrying it out; the actions, or the words, might still come out laboriously, or, well, awkwardly. And this though the norm is real, known, relevant, and detailed! Even though the parties to the situation are all part of the same community, as far as the norm goes! (For instance: telling a new lover that you have an STD is the sort of thing that you could conceivably find awkward to carry out, yet which you would undertake because it's clearly the right thing to do. You *should* do it.)

All of which makes the felt need in (5b) somewhat odd: suppose the norm did exist and was known to the person who craves it. How would that help? Here is a thought experiment. A well-known comment on Ask Metafilter distinguished between what it called **Ask Culture and Guess Culture**:

In some families, you grow up with the expectation that it's OK to ask for anything at all, but you gotta realize you might get no for an answer. This is Ask Culture.

In Guess Culture, you avoid putting a request into words unless you're pretty sure the answer will be yes. Guess Culture depends on a tight net of shared expectations. A key skill is putting out delicate feelers. If you do this with enough subtlety, you won't even have to make the request directly; you'll get an offer. Even then, the offer may be genuine or pro forma; it takes yet more skill and delicacy to discern whether you should accept.

All kinds of problems spring up around the edges. If you're a Guess Culture person . . . then unwelcome requests from Ask Culture people seem presumptuous and out of line . . .

If you're an Ask Culture person, Guess Culture behavior can seem incomprehensible, inconsistent, and rife with passive aggression.

Thing is, Guess behaviors only work among a subset of other Guess people—ones who share a fairly specific set of expectations and signaling techniques. The farther you get from your own family and friends and subculture, the more you'll have to embrace Ask behavior. Otherwise you'll spend your life in a cloud of mild outrage at (*pace* Moomin fans) the Cluelessness of Everyone.

Suppose one is a Guesser among Askers, who has accepted that the local norm (which may be “local” to one or two people with whom one happens currently to be dealing) is to just ask for things, and to treat offers made as being made sincerely, rather than as polite fictions the other party is expected to decline. Suppose one has even convinced oneself that this is really just as good a way of doing things as that to which one is accustomed and has thus endorsed it, at least when dealing with known Askers. Will this make it any easier to make a direct request for something—possibly putting the other person in the position of having to say “no”? Or would it be easier to witness that kind of request, as an onlooker? Well, *maybe*. But not necessarily.

I suspect the help that the norm is thought to provide is something like this: if there were a norm—one that really got into the details of how to act—then *I* wouldn't have to be concerned with *my own action*, I wouldn't need to think about it or consider it or anything, it could come as automatically to me as saying “fine” when asked “how are you?” does. I could follow each step as it came, mindlessly.

The norm would, in a sense, remove all that nasty, that awkward, sociality from social interactions, because I wouldn't have to be present with, to consider, either the other person or even myself. I could just go. A strict enough, detailed enough, commonly known enough norm is a license to ignore others.

Debbie's awkwardness-avoiding technique, "laying down the law", works precisely because it creates patterns of behavior for her and for Pete to hew to—it functions as a self-supplied norm that removes the need to deal with the openness and unpredictability of life. The norms of etiquette largely have a similar function; they are, at their best, there to smooth things over by providing answers to coordination problems, and tell participants in the same culture how to interact with each other as representatives of that culture without having to interact with each other as individuals. Norms of etiquette paper over the abyss. Removing sociality from our interactions is the service they imperfectly provide us; the fantasy is that the service could be universalized.⁷ It's a more social form of the misogyny, hatred of reason, that Kant refers to in the *Groundwork*, the envy of animals that leads off Schiller's *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, and the whole raft of Germanic phil-hellenes who praised the Greeks for their putative immediacy. If only we didn't have to *think*, if only it could all be instinct—or all norm.

The contrast to the Hellenes primeval is the all-too-mediated modern, who reflects too much; we can see something of this in the experience of a breakdown in the social that, per Kotsko (and here I don't wish to disagree), characterizes the awkward. This "experience of a breakdown" can be taken in two ways, not necessarily distinct for the characterization of awkwardness but worth separating out at least at first. The observer of an awkward exchange experiences a breakdown, at second hand, the way an audience member has an experience of the theater; the participant experiences one, too, at first hand, the way an actor has an experience of the theater.

The sort of interaction that will lead to the characteristically awkward break-

⁷The fact that this is their purpose is one reason it's never etiquette to draw attention to another's ignorance or failures of etiquette and why one should, rather, just go along:: consider the famous story of drinking from the finger bowl.

down isn't one in which some or all of the parties are not guided by a norm (whether out of ignorance of the norm, or the nonexistence of the norm), but one in which they cannot act easily and fluently, and in which this lack of fluency becomes an explicit part of the actual or potential action. At least for the observer, if everything in the observed scene seems to be going smoothly, then *this particular kind* of breakdown isn't in the offing, however else it may be a disaster. On the other hand, one of the actors could be visibly reaching for what to do, thrown off a normal pattern of acting and reacting, discomfited in some way by what's going on—then the onlooker would have an experience of a breakdown, at second hand. (Recall that none of the primary actors need find the proceedings awkward.)

The participant's perspective on this would exemplify the modern, over-reflective, mediated type; someone who wishes or needs to act but has little idea what sort of action would be appropriate or how to go about pursuing it, who must therefore *contemplate* what to do before, or while, doing it, and as it were observes himself acting while acting. (There is a mode of *fremdschämen* one might call embarrassment on behalf of oneself as another.) Think here of the way that thinking about even a moderately complex movement impairs your ability to perform it—you move, quite literally, more awkwardly. And this can indeed shed light, *via negativa*, on the way things *normally* work—normally you don't have to think much about what you're doing, not explicitly anyway; your doing it happens without your having to monitor yourself. (Think also of the way the affect of awkwardness can diminish once you're actually acting, and have to keep going—whereas immediately beforehand it's possible to stew nearly indefinitely.)

If the observer of the ugly American's speech isn't embarrassed on his behalf, but really feels awkward in this sense, then it must be because he wishes to, but doesn't quite know how to, act. If he is inclined to be reflective in general this may lead him to think about how well his interactions normally go; normally one knows more or less how to get on with others, or can make it up well enough as one goes—enough so that the fact that one is interacting with *others* can fade out. Not because one falls back onto norms as external support, giving one step-by-step

instruction, but because normally oneself and others are in sufficient accord that they *aren't* others, that they are like one. Awkwardness brings their otherness into relief; it reminds us of the separateness of others and of the openness of the social world.

I remarked earlier that the experience of awkwardness could be isolating if only one person finds something awkward—if you think you should intervene in a situation, and you can tell, or suspect, that you're the *only* one who thinks it requires intervention, to your sense of ungainliness, of not knowing *how* to act, is joined the isolation of having no one who sees that something needs doing. This isolation, and its potentially attendant sense of unreality, is described on a grand scale in J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (and very well discussed in Cora Diamond's "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy"), but it shows up in decidedly humbler circumstances as well. Kotsko at one point notes that telling "a joke that not only falls flat but reduces its audience to embittered silence" (7) is apt to lead to an awkward pause, and considers whether it's the teller or the audience that's to blame. (Both, he says.) But why should it be more awkward when a joke falls flat than when any other kind of thing one might say falls flat? *Can* just anything else one might say "fall flat"? "Hurry up, we'll be late!" can be incorrect as regards the second part; it can be unheeded as a warning or as a command; it can be misheard or not heard—but can it fall flat? What would that involve? When I ask you for the salt, or a favor, and you don't acknowledge me, that's vexing, but I don't feel as if something's gone *wrong* in quite the way I do when you give me a blank stare after I tell what I think is a really funny joke. I'm not cut off from you in the same way.

What am I trying to *do* when I tell you a joke? Not give you information, or get information from you. Amuse you, no doubt, but typically I'll be trying to amuse you by, simultaneously, *sharing* something with you. I'm telling you a joke *I* think is funny, which I think, or hope, you'll find funny, too. With luck, we'll find it funny together, and in the same way. As Ted Cohen puts it, in answering this same question in his book *Jokes* (in his version *you* are telling *me* the joke):

I think what you want is to *reach* me, and therein verify that you understand me, at least a little, which is to exhibit that we are, at least a little, alike. This is the establishment of a felt intimacy between us. (29)

And, as he notes, with a joke, if I'm wrong—if you don't find the joke funny—it's not as if I can support my joke somehow. I can't show you that it *is* funny, really, the way I could show you that we *will* be late—look at the time, and the traffic—if we don't hurry. “With the unsuccessful joke, there is nothing to point to besides the joke itself” (*Jokes*, 29), and you just did point to that, by telling it; pointing again is bootless. And so, says Cohen,

All you can say of the fellow who doesn't laugh at your joke, at least all you can say when when it has been established that he understands you, that he gets the joke, is that *he is not like you*, at least not in regard to the dynamics of the joke. . . .

How important is that? Surely you can inhabit a world with this person, even though he is a kind of stranger to you. . . . [W]hat has failed is the effort to achieve an intimacy between teller and hearer. It is a failure to join one another in a community of appreciation. (26)

When I tell a joke and you obviously don't find it funny, one thing I learn is that we *aren't* alike in the way I thought we might be. I've made an overture to you—I exposed my sense of what I think is funny, and revealed something (perhaps something minor, but something nonetheless) of who I am to you—and it turns out that I was wrong about—about you, perhaps, or perhaps about me. Finding out that we differ in this way is isolating in a way that merely *knowing* that we so differ isn't; it's more visceral, and leaves one somewhat at a loss: if it's not quite a *rejection* of an offer of community, it's a discovery that one stands does not belong with another in a community. (Etiquette would spare us this revelation, and asks us to at least chuckle politely.)

Clearly, this sort of awkward isolation is a standing possibility; perhaps it threatens especially with those one does not know very well, but the differences it might reveal between a person and her close friends will be more significant for

that very closeness. And if awkwardness does arise out of uncertainty about what would constitute acting competently, combined with a felt need to act somehow, then it will be a standing possibility for all—nothing can adequately prepare us for *everything*, after all.

Kotsko thinks there is something *particularly* awkward about the current moment, a phase of “cultural awkwardness” in which “there seems to be a set of norms in force, but it feels somehow impossible to follow them or even fully know them” (16–17). This seems right—but I’d take the current moment to be of rather longer standing than Kotsko does. He traces the culturally awkward age we currently inhabit in the early 2000s back to the 1960s, coming after the decline of “traditional values”, through the 70s and 80s, and succeeding on the ironic 90s.⁸ But is this awkward moment really of such recent vintage? And if it is, is that the explanation? I would be impressed at anyone who made it all the way through *The Awful Truth* without cringing. In fact, Kotsko’s description of cultural awkwardness could serve easily as a motto for modernism. On Gabriel Josipovici’s telling, for instance, Philip Roth *isn’t* a modernist writer, despite his technical tricks, because “he never doubts the validity of what he is doing or his ability to find a language adequate to his needs” (*What Ever Happened to Modernism?*, 167), whereas Cervantes *is* because what a person might even be up to in writing a novel in the first place is a question for him (though he is, of course, writing a novel regardless—“I can’t go on, I’ll go on” captures something of awkwardness). The ground beneath Roth’s feet is solid—he is self-assured, confident—but “for some artists at least since the time of Dürer, and for any serious artist since 1789, the ground has been anything but solid” (173). The nature of what they’re engaged in is unclear to

⁸The ironic moment is said to have lapsed not because of 9/11 (an explanation whose popularity, if it is still popular, is puzzling, since the trend clearly continued well past late 2001) but because it “simply exhausted itself” (24). I would like to advance, however, the following bold thesis: so-called “exhaustion” is *never* the explanation for the end of a cultural trend or movement; such things are *never* actually exhausted—exhausted objectively speaking in a way that would compel us to move on to something new when we recognize the exhaustion. It’s always possible to keep going. We may *find* them exhausted, but the exhaustion is in us, not in the things. To say that a trend ended because it was exhausted is just to say that people stopped pursuing it—it’s not an explanation at all.

them, as is the nature of what could constitute confirmation that they *are* engaged in something worthwhile. They're all too conscious that there's a gulf between them and their subject matter or form, and between them and their potential audience; they press on in the awareness of the precarity of community. (Imagine that you've lost all confidence in your sense of what jokes are funny, to the point that a positive reaction from a friend to one of your jokes only leaves you wondering if that person, too, has a defective sense of humor. Telling jokes continues to be important to you, but you aren't quite sure what you're doing when telling them.)

Stanley Cavell, one of the philosophers most sensitive to the difficulties of the openness and frailty of our interactions with each other, also found in modernism a compelling condensation of his concerns, illuminated both in modernist productions themselves and in the possibilities of criticism. An early, testy essay, "Music Discomposed", takes up the issue of the possibility of fraudulence in art, or fraudulent art, something that, for Cavell, modernism makes uniquely salient:

It is, I take it, significant about modernism and its "permanent revolution" that its audience recurrently tells itself the famous stories of riots and walkouts and outrages that have marked its history. It is as though the *impulse* to shout fraud and storm out is always present, but fear of the possible consequence overmasters the impulse. Remember Saint-Saëns: He said the Emperor had no clothes, and then history stripped him naked. (*Must we mean what we say?*, 206–207)

Not that artists hadn't been dismissed as frauds earlier, or that there's been a lack of people willing to cry "humbug!" after *Le sacre du printemps*. But the problem is exacerbated because—this is only a slight exaggeration—no one knows what they're doing or how to tell if anyone else does. The essay takes off, in fact, from an investigation of essays in scholarly periodicals devoted to then-recent music, and the attempts by the composers writing in them to give some justification—typically philosophical, or cod-philosophical—to the music they were writing. Such a justification was necessary because there were no longer any common practice or generally accepted vocabulary or goals, and, because it no longer seemed possible to go back to what had been done before, not much in the way of an audience, ei-

ther. Their writings constitute attempts to figure out what they might be doing, on the fly as it were, yet “one comes to realize that these professionals themselves do not quite know who is and who is not rightly included among their peers, whose work counts and whose does not . . . and one result clearly communicated by these periodicals is that there is no obvious way to find out” (188), including via perceptive critics, since the exact same problem afflicts *them*. Instead, all the artist—the composer, in this case, but the problem is general—can do is put the stuff out there, for it to find an audience, or not. And if it finds an audience, or doesn’t, even that won’t prove anything. (Frauds can last, the real thing can be obscured.) But it’s the thing itself, not its scaffolding of theorizing, that matters and is experienced by the audience. The theory can be written up in a journal, but you have to *hear* (read, see) the work; it can’t be told, not to someone who hasn’t heard (read, seen) it too:

It is not merely that I want to tell you how it is with me, how I feel, in order to find sympathy or to be left alone, or for any other of the reasons for which one reveals one’s feelings. It’s rather that I want to tell you something I’ve seen, or heard, or realized, or come to understand, for the reasons for which *such* things are communicated (because it is news, about a world we share, or could). Only I find that I can’t *tell* you; and that makes it all the more urgent to tell you. . . . It matters that others know what I see, in a way it does not matter whether they know my tastes. It matters, there is a burden, because **unless I can tell what I know, there is a suggestion (and to myself as well) that I do not know.** But I *do*—what I see is *that* (pointing to the object). But for that to communicate, you have to see it, too. . . . Art is often praised because it brings men together. But it also separates them. (192–193, bolding added)

The “I” in this quotation could be an enthusiast, a critic, an artist—all suffer from the same problem. If I can’t get it across to you, not only are we a kind of stranger to each other, I can’t even be certain that *I’m* getting something and *you’re* missing it. Pointing to the theoretical justification for the work is like pointing to the expla-

nation of the joke—it doesn't compel appreciation, or laughter.⁹ And the sort of structure Cavell finds in modern art really is quite analogous to that Cohen finds in telling jokes. Suppose my score is performed, and no one is moved; or suppose I'm moved by another's piece, and find that I can't adequately express what it is that moved me to you—where “adequacy” would involve my getting you to see what I see (even if we aren't entirely unanimous about it). What then, for me? Am I wrong? You? How would I tell? There's nothing *else* for me to appeal to, just the thing (just the joke); I'm nonplussed, and shown to be mistaken at least in my belief that we're like each other in a way that, to me, is important. Awkward! Not because of the violation of a norm (say, because you didn't applaud politely).

The awkwardness has two sources. First, privately, there is no clear right thing to do at all, no standard for behavior; if we feel compelled to act regardless, we have to some extent make it up, aware that we lack external support or guidance. Second, more interpersonally, *having* hazarded something and sought reflection or acknowledgement in your response, I find—we find, it's awkward on both sides—that it is not forthcoming. Now what? What do we do with each other? The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea still lies between us.¹⁰ What will I do when we next interact? To recur to some previous examples, if I find it awkward to confront

⁹This suggests a sort of critical nihilism which is foreign to Cavell. Explaining a joke *can* lead to appreciation and laughter—if I didn't already get it. It's only if I understood the joke and just didn't think it was funny that (further) explanation is bootless. And attempting to win over, or dissuade, someone who didn't or did like a piece of music by saying “but you see, it was written in accord with the strictures of total organization” may not help, but that hardly means that there's nothing to be said about a work—one does try to call attention to aspects of the thing under discussion in attempting to communicate what one appreciates, or finds lacking, in it. Only one may fail at that, too.

¹⁰Here may be a decent place to note a connection between cultural awkwardness and irony that is, I believe, uncharted by Kotsko. If cultural awkwardness is the state of there being no, or only unknowable, norms guiding behavior in some arena, one of the many reasonably natural responses is to just do whatever, as the whim arises, without pretending to be governed by external standards (or possibly, since one always suspects that this may be a more accurate description, with the pretense of not caring about external standards)—to be, that is, an ironist. This isn't Cavell's response—he still wants something one can *mean*—but it's certainly an *available* response. If the waning of 90s irony has led to a resurgence of thematized awkwardness, perhaps that's because it was not a *satisfactory* response, and the discovery of its unsatisfactoriness has led to a more explicit thematization of the underlying issue.

a boor abroad, that's because I already know from his behavior that we occupy different worlds. I can't make a friendly suggestion that he might reconsider his modes of interacting with others; we don't have that kind of relationship. If I find it awkward to broach the topic of STDs with a partner, it's because I don't know what kind of reaction I'll be met with (I might also be tentative about telling obscure jokes to a new partner, and for the same reason).

This tiny excursus on modernism started off as a way of questioning the uniqueness of the very recent past vis-a-vis cultural awkwardness, since the exposure to awkwardness implicit in all joke-telling seems to be pervasive, rather than local to one moment. (Or at least one particularly *recent* moment.) And lo: not only do we discover cultural awkwardness earlier, it comes in essentially the same form as is at play in telling jokes that flop. (At last, perfectly respectable grounds for likening Stockhausen's music to a joke!) I attempted to describe both, the jokes and the music, by pointing out that there was nothing *outside* the joke or the music that the teller, the composer, or the hearer (in double sense) could point to that would *settle* a dispute, fix one's assessment as right. There's no getting outside, nothing independent of our own reactions and insights (if they *are* insights).

Cavell thought that that was the condition of art generally, and modernism just made it apparent. But he also thinks it is, yet more generally, our condition. Not of art, but just the predicament we're stuck with, a reason that skepticism will never be vanquished, philosophy will always be called for, and—though he doesn't explicitly say *this*—awkwardness will always be with us. A justly famous passage puts it well:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not . . . the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an

appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying. (*Must we mean what we say?*, 52)

Cavell’s linguistic focus leads him to “grasping books of rules”; we can extend that to grasping norms: merely *grasping* the norm doesn’t help us actually act, especially if it’s called into question or otherwise thematized, and anyway Cavell is concerned with those cases where we’re projected into *new* situations. And while, on the whole we do, sometimes we don’t. When we don’t, it’s not necessarily a big deal. But it is, at the least, a reminder that even when we *do* it’s not because we’ve all got it right but because we accord, contingently and temporarily, in our sensibilities.

I say it’s a reminder, but of course not everyone will actually be reminded. Nor, as we know, does everyone find the ostensibly awkward unbearable or even vexing, at least not in the same situations. Cavell and Kotsko both seem to be imagining maximally sensitive, minimally blustery people. In real life there remains such a thing as not noticing, or just not caring, that someone else hasn’t liked your joke. (One suspects that those who deliberately make things awkward for others are of this sort.) Or there are those fabled few to whom the fact that there isn’t a pre-approved script to follow in, say, haranguing the tourist boor, or whatever, would not be a problem. This is another target for the hatred of reason mentioned earlier, and another target of envy: those prone to the paralysis and the cringing of awkwardness are apt to think simultaneously that the ones who aren’t are missing something—are insensitive clods, even—but also that it wouldn’t be so bad, on the whole, to be insensitive in that way. Think how much easier everything would be! Surely it’s no accident that Kotsko’s followup to *Awkwardness* was *Why We Love Sociopaths*.

This is wrongheaded. Granted, we wouldn’t be able to get on with each other without established practices that smoothed over our interactions day to day (or month to month, or year to year)—they’re crutches we need to learn how to be able

to walk in the first place, which we can never really put aside for good. The dangers that face us are, on the one hand, pretending that we *are* walking on our own two feet when we're really using our own idiosyncratic crutches, ignoring everyone else's—the strategy of the clod, who may well get around reasonably effectively, but at the cost of knowing neither himself nor others—or, on the other, recognizing them and wishing we never had to set them down—that there were enough, and detailed enough, norms that no novel interaction would leave us exposed to each other, so long as we just follow them. Both preclude open and direct communication, because the openness of such communication is precisely the willingness to let the other be revealed to oneself as other—or oneself to the other as other—as surprising, not already accounted for, as a person in their own right. There's no general answer to the question what carrying it out correctly would be. It's always potentially awkward because it's always particular, always calls for attention to its own progress, and for attention to the one with whom one is speaking.

Kotsko asks us to embrace our awkwardness, and it's an admirable call. He connects it to a “utopia of awkwardness”, as if the “community of awkwardness” he claims is formed in certain encounters were a way out, at least temporarily, from the community at large. In its particulars this leads Kotsko to positions it would be hard to quibble with:

No one should be forced to conform to the arbitrary social norms of others . . . What this means in practice is that . . . rather than making the weaker ones (the numerical minority, the socially graceless, the disadvantaged) conform to the dominant group, the stronger ones should do their best to accommodate those who are having difficulty.
(79)

Remember, it isn't etiquette to point out others' trespasses against etiquette.

The idea of a community of awkwardness, however, seems misplaced, however the phrase is construed. We've already seen that there isn't *necessarily* a community of participants in any given awkward situation—the ugly American example—and we could not have a society of the awkward. Kotsko glimpses the reason why in the course of explicating the utopia of awkwardness:

It is “no place” because there’s no need to go anywhere: the utopia of awkwardness is where we already are. Rather than an ideal order that must be established, it is a strangely inverted kind of utopia that all of our social orders try and fail to *escape*.

Here one must reject the core presupposition of the liberal political theory that has shaped the modern world. These theorists . . . focused on the idea of freely-entered contracts . . . [but] we come into the world in a state of irreducible dependence . . . Such is the joy and burden of being human—we will never really be free individuals freely entering into contracts. (87)

A self-aware “social order” can certainly be seen as an attempt to escape awkwardness. (Debbie attempts to impose such a social order.) But the fact of our irreducible dependence is relevant to more than just the contractualist tradition. It amounts to the acknowledgement that even if we aren’t always already part of a “social order” properly so called, with whatever apparatus that might involve, we *are* always already in society. But that means an awkward normlessness isn’t an original “utopia of mutual enjoyment—unmediated by those social orders that . . . serve only to separate and exclude” (88) lurking just below the surface of, and easily accessible to, current social arrangements. Moreover, though even in these pages closing pages Kotsko reiterates that awkwardness is social in nature, the description of this putative utopia is curiously asocial. It’s not individualistic, by any means, but it strikes one as a vision of living together in which, having admitted that society is artificial, we have nothing further to worry about.

The televisual exponent of radical, utopian awkwardness is *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and Kotsko particularly commends a season-ending scene in which a chef’s Tourette’s-induced outburst during a restaurant’s opening night, this supposedly being awkward, leads not to a disaster but to a Carnavalesque interlude in which everyone in the place joins in the swearing. As Kotsko admits, the scene, a temporary suspension of the normal rules of public behavior, doesn’t lead to anything beyond itself, but in it at least the characters other than the chef are “joining in someone else’s [awkwardness]” (88). This is a strange description that suggests that awkwardness belongs to a particular person rather than being part of a situ-

ation; more serious, though, is the fact that the restaurant founders' and patrons' decision to swear along with the chef seems more to be an evasion than an embracing of any awkwardness there might be.

A different episode, which in Kotsko's view does not have the first flaw, in fact points up both: in it, Larry David, having forgotten his line in a production of *The Producers*, breaks character to tell some jokes, "winning the audience back and giving himself time to think of the line" (84). If this points to anything outside itself, it points to awkwardness à la Kotsko as a method of temporarily diverting tension so that one can return to one's customary business: a Saturnalian release that actually supports the social order. And, like all such releases, it does not actually confront the issue at hand. The examples suffer from not even being clear-cut cases of awkwardness in the first place, but if there is anything to be confronted in the chef case at all—which is far from clear—everyone deciding to join in hardly seems the way to do it. If a performer has obviously forgotten his lines on stage, the audience might be embarrassed on his behalf, and he in at least one sense certainly does not know how to proceed, since he doesn't know his lines—but his decision to completely break character is not a doubling-down on awkwardness. (The forgotten line only matters if he's trying to continue playing the role.) It's like responding to the revelation of a lack of community when a joke falls flat by forcing some laughter out, then agreeing to forget about it, or deflecting an attempt at open communication with barely topical reference-based humor.

The call to embrace awkwardness isn't admirable because awkwardness points us to a new kind of social order; it's admirable because, at least some of the time, *working through* the awkwardness is the only way to arrive at something better—a modification, most likely, of a previous social relation. (I am inclined to take these things at a much smaller scale than is Kotsko.) The best response to a failed attempt at humor may well be to move on, though there too lingering in the gap thus revealed may be profitable; perhaps the joke failed because the teller assumed you would share his discreditable assumptions. But take the attempt to communicate openly and directly to another. Awkward to undertake, and potentially more awk-

ward once underway: but to put off the attempt for the sake of avoiding awkwardness is to put off the other person, to consign them to remaining at an impersonal distance from oneself.

Sometimes, that's a perfectly reasonable response. Not every context is a happy one for puzzling out our lives together, and not every person is one with whom such an investigation is happily carried out. In graduate school I knew a fellow, a student and quite possibly a follower of Pyrrhonian skepticism, who pursued, with honesty and perception, a Hellenistic vision of philosophy as a way of life. He pursued it at, for example, parties, asking the other grad students what they were really doing, what was the significance of these academic pursuits, the specific questions investigated by the department and the weird institutions in which such investigations are nowadays carried out, and a host more specific questions which I can now no longer recall. One began to understand how Socrates met his end. The social awkwardness of over-earnest liberals in some part derives from their not recognizing that many people don't wish, at the drop of any hat, to discuss matters of utmost seriousness, especially of personal seriousness. Baring oneself in every encounter would be exhausting. It's also, hopefully, unnecessary, either because the relations we have with most others are sufficiently socially schematized that we can simply remain at an impersonal distance, never actually encountering the new ground that requires self-exposure, or because, having had the awkward exchange, and found that we are, or can be, or, perhaps, cannot be part of a community together, our relationship has been revised, with any luck in such a way that the formerly new territory has been recognized and negotiated. Future excursions into the same need not be awkward at all.

The best outcome of an awkward encounter removes the awkwardness from future similar encounters. If social orders attempt to forestall awkwardness, an awkward encounter is oriented toward a restoration of (modified) sociality. But no sociality will be so modified that awkwardness is not a standing possibility. If the desire to avoid awkwardness by being immersed in instinct can be likened to the envy of animals, then perhaps the idea that we could encounter each person

fully, without the aid of social structures, is a fantasy of divinity. As Aristotle very nearly said: only a god or an animal can live without awkwardness.