As history shows, the idea that human beings can act as autonomous moral agents was the hard-won result of a difficult process of discovery. The period when this discovery was first making itself felt among many of the world’s major cultures is sometimes known as the Axial Age, extending roughly from 900 to 200 BCE. Central to Axial Age thinking is the idea that people can govern their behaviours by appealing, as individuals, to universal standards. By contrast, the communal norms and obligations prescribed by family, tribe, or kin group allowed little room for freedom of conscience or individual interpretation. Rather, one’s place within the group constituted one’s identity, confirmed by traditional forms of social organization, such as ritual, caste, and kin.

The Axial Age marked a revolution in human thought and behaviour because it elevated the moral conscience of individual persons above the traditional demands of cult practice and group morality. Thus, in ancient Greece, Socrates was condemned to death for teaching young people to think for themselves and to explore the idea that universal principles are the measure of morality. He was accused
also of defaming the gods — meaning that he transgressed against traditional practice and custom. These two accusations, at first apparently unrelated, are in fact closely linked: universal ethical norms are observed as a matter of conscience, stressing the autonomy of the individual agent; by contrast, the gods are the guarantors of traditional practice, the cult that binds society together not just by ritual observance but also by mutual obligation enshrined in law, social hierarchy, and shared understandings of the world and our place in it. By promoting the moral autonomy of individuals, Socrates therefore could not avoid offering a radical challenge to time-honoured tradition and to the divine authority protecting it.²

Similar universalizing breakthroughs were made by Isaiah and Lao Tzu, with the Buddha and Jesus emphasizing the same governing insight as that of Socrates by calling their followers to realize that a person can be liberated by adhering to universal principles in comparison to which traditional loyalties, ritual obligations, and the like are insignificant. Understandably, these Axial Age breakthroughs were not without conflict, not least because the bonds of family and of traditional religious observance are not simply replaced by the new universalism. After all, each human being needs to be nurtured within a family or cultural group as a prior condition of achieving moral autonomy. Furthermore, family affection, as well as a sense of duty, continue to make a claim even on individuals who have liberated themselves from the constraints of a kin group that might at one point have impeded or hampered their full moral development. An entire repudiation of one’s roots — the condition of one’s primary nurture — would diminish the humanity that the liberating universal vision is supposed to enhance. Consequently, the historical conflicts attendant upon the Axial Age breakthroughs are reproduced in the development of every individual human being who lives in a society that puts a high value on moral autonomy and where families remain the main providers of primary nurture.

With these points in mind, in the following pages, I suggest that much of what is striking and captivating in Van Gogh’s letters emerges from his personal struggle with his own Axial Age dilemma as
he attempts to assert his moral autonomy against the demands and requirements of his family. One main reason why this dilemma plays out in such an intense manner through virtually the entire course of his correspondence is that Vincent depended so heavily on Theo for money. Paradoxically, Theo’s stipend provided Vincent with the autonomy he needed to pursue his vocation while simultaneously making him all the more dependent on family ties.

Van Gogh’s Axial Age Dilemma

As we saw in chapter 1, Vincent came into conflict with his parents on matters having to do with religion and morality — specifically, Vincent’s turning away from the church and his relationships with Kee and Sien. On these matters, Theo was the chief mediator between Vincent and his parents, but Vincent could not be sure if Theo would take his side or would join forces with their father. On the one hand, as an art dealer, Theo was open to Vincent’s higher aspirations, encouraging him to pursue his vocation as a painter and enabling him to do so. On the other hand, Theo was a loyal family member who took offence at Vincent’s harsh criticisms of his own kith and kin. As we might expect, Vincent’s personal struggle for autonomy is mirrored to a remarkable degree in how he deals with Theo’s twofold role as friend and brother.

It is important to note as well that throughout the correspondence, Vincent’s relationship with Theo is constantly in process of transformation, as are his relationships with other family members. Thus, in the early letters, Vincent addresses Theo much as an older brother would, offering directions for reading and assorted kinds of advice about life. But as Vincent’s idealism suffered the several disillusionments described in chapters 1 and 2, he became increasingly alienated from his family, including Theo. In his letters from Antwerp, he is unpleasantly indifferent to his mother and sisters, and in Paris, he was an unconscionably difficult houseguest, making life all but unbearable for his brother. But in the wake of his mental illness, Vincent’s affection
for his family was renewed, and he shows concern in his letters for his mother and his sister Wil, as well as for Theo’s new wife, Jo. Still, to the end, Vincent’s reluctant, conscience-stricken dependency on Theo’s money caused him to feel conflicted, and, by way of an irony worthy of Greek tragedy, the joyful arrival of Theo and Jo’s baby caused Vincent some anguished concern because he realized that he would be an extra, perhaps unsustainable drain on Theo’s resources.

In engaging with these issues, Vincent’s letters are by turns affectionate, needy, resentful, aggressive, jubilant, depressed, and (often uncomfortably) manipulative. The pattern of loss and recovery in his rocky relationship with his family can be charted in the letters by attending to how he resorts to humour. As with the appeals to Dr. Pangloss (dealt with in chapter 5), Van Gogh’s humour is partly an antidote to the suffering he endured because of his mental illness. But his later letters also suggest that he had resolved — however uneasily — some of the pressing religious and moral problems with which he had wrestled so strenuously before he went to Paris. As a result, his humour reflects a lightness of touch uncharacteristic of most of his earlier correspondence. As Wouter van der Veen points out, Van Gogh’s reading reflects this change, as he became less concerned about issues raised by the likes of Balzac, Hugo, and Zola, and instead favoured the lighter, often satirical humour of Daudet, Voltaire, and Loti. Admittedly, Van Gogh returned to his old favourites at the very end — Shakespeare and Dickens among them — but more in the vein of revisiting old friends than as a way of tangling again with the moral and religious issues that had captivated him earlier. One way to view Van Gogh’s increasingly deployed sense of humour in the later letters, therefore, is to see it both as a defiance of the solitariness imposed by suffering and as a signal of a release of tension, which in turn promoted a more congenial attitude towards his family.
Vincent and Theo: Hard Talk and Second Thoughts

I will have more to say by and by about Van Gogh’s humour; for now, let us return to the main topic of autonomy and dependency in Vincent’s relationship with Theo by considering an example from a letter written to Theo from Drenthe, after Vincent’s breakup with Sien:

The longer I think about it the more I see that Millet believes in a something on High.

He speaks of it very differently from Pa, for instance — for he leaves it more vague, yet I see more in Millet’s vagueness than in Pa. And I see the same as in Millet in Rembrandt, in Corot, in Breton, in Brion, in short in the work of several people, although I don’t hear them hold forth about it.

The end of things doesn’t have to be an ability to explain but to base oneself on it effectively.

In short, Theo, a certain indeterminate but nonetheless fixed feeling in me that it’s the first duty to direct the heart upwards leads me, as brother and as friend to a brother and a friend, to ask you to consider directing yourself towards a life founded on simpler principles.

Principles that I can’t define other than: sensing that duty is unlikely to bring someone to the Paris business, but rather points to retiring from it.

Can you share this sense to some extent? Think about it, reflect on it; if you need time for it, put yourself to the test and take your time. Any hesitation along the lines of “I’m not an artist,” though, only seems justified to me in so far as it doesn’t stand in the way of doing what you have to do and I have to do to become one. (401/3:56)

Vincent begins by opposing Millet’s spiritual sense to Pa’s, drawing then on Rembrandt and Corot for further support against Pa’s dogmatism. Yet Vincent does not denounce his father outright but leaves Theo to put a name on Pa’s attitude that stands opposed to Millet’s “vagueness.” The opposition between his father and some of Vincent’s admired artists was already familiar to Theo as Vincent’s way
of emphasizing the incompatibility of his vocation as an artist and the conventional religious and moral values that Vincent condemned for their narrowness, coldness, and hypocrisy. Here again, Vincent makes the point, toning it down perhaps because he is appealing here to Theo for cooperative understanding.

It is worth noting here that the word “vagueness,” applied approvingly to Millet, recurs as the “certain indeterminate” feeling about how Theo shares the same higher values, aspiring (like Millet) “upwards.” Without stating the affinity outright, Vincent aligns Theo with the famous artists and, by implication, against Pa. Again, Theo is addressed as both “brother” and “friend,” and here Vincent draws a distinction between the family bond and the comradeship that he praised as part of the painter’s vocation. Admittedly, Vincent saw Theo as fulfilling both roles, but he frequently singles out Theo’s special insight into a world of values beyond family obligations and relationships. These are the “simpler principles” that Vincent mentions and that he feels Theo should embrace by also becoming a painter. There is a higher form of “duty,” opposed to the mercenary concerns and obligations of Theo’s art dealership — “the Paris business.” Vincent thus reinforces his resistance to a philistine culture based on an oppressive morality and driven by mercenary ambition, preferring instead a culture governed by creativity and a higher “duty” that does not regard money as an end in itself, a culture in which one lives not hypocritically but freely and autonomously among like-minded friends.

And so, as the excerpt develops, Vincent presses the invitation to Theo to put himself on the side of the artists and of “something on High,” as distinct from the conventional world of family, duty, and business. Vincent goes on to ask Theo to examine his own motivations (“put yourself to the test and take your time”), and in the final sentence, he makes a point that is interesting partly because initially it is slightly unclear: “Any hesitation along the lines of ‘I’m not an artist,’ though, only seems justified to me in so far as it doesn’t stand in the way of doing what you have to to become one.” That is, Vincent doesn’t mind Theo describing himself as not being an artist at present, as long as this description will not prevent him from becoming an artist.
in the future. The fact that the complex sentence causes us an initial, cognitive hesitation suggests something of the mixed motivations that inform it. On several occasions, Vincent asked Theo to become an artist and to join him. Vincent must have realized, however, that such a thing would probably not happen, and the very insistence that Theo should make such a decision suggests how lonely Vincent was. But here, Vincent uses the invitation to emphasize the fact that he himself has chosen the higher vocation, whereas Theo has not. And so, indirectly, he appeals for Theo’s continuing financial support by bringing to bear the implied weight of his own moral superiority. Theo will surely not turn away from the one with whom he can best “share this sense” of a higher duty that aligns the brothers, as friends, with Millet, Corot, and Rembrandt.

Even in these brief paragraphs, then, several elements are intricately at play. Vincent’s loneliness in Drenthe is echoed in his desire for companionship, and his tempered criticism of his father might suggest that he was thinking already that he might have to go to live with his parents in Nuenen. His anxiety about losing Theo’s support (or, worse, Theo himself, should he go to America) informs both the appeal for Theo’s sympathy and the suggestion that the brothers should become comrades in art. Also, by contrast with his businessman brother, Vincent has staked everything on a higher calling, and by encouraging Theo now to take a step up the moral ladder, Vincent reminds him that he is, in fact, a step or two lower down. If Theo doesn’t throw over his job, he should at least keep paying to support his brother’s vocation.

Vincent could be shamelessly manipulative when it suited him, yet in the present example, it is hard to know how self-consciously he was playing on Theo’s sympathies while maintaining a balance among the other elements that we have considered in the excerpt. It might, therefore, be worth noting that throughout the letters, Vincent does provide evidence of his authorial self-consciousness. We have seen something of this in chapter 6, in connection to the relationship between spontaneity and technique. I now suggest that a similar self-awareness is broadly evident in the correspondence as a whole and that it would be unwise to underestimate Van Gogh’s writerly skill.
on the grounds that his letters so often strike us as spontaneous and disarmingly direct.

I cannot dwell here on the large and interesting question of Van Gogh’s many revisions and emendations. His usual neatly ordered handwriting is often interrupted by additional materials in the margins, crossings out, bold letters, and underlinings. These changes indicate that he often had second thoughts about what he had written and that he reshaped his first draft to express nuances and qualifications that he did not want the reader to miss. But although these revisions are worth careful attention, they constitute a topic in their own right, extending beyond the reach of the present study. And so I will focus here on a different set of indicators of Van Gogh’s self-consciousness about the process of writing itself.

For instance, writing from The Hague, Vincent apologizes to Theo for expressing himself “sometimes in rough terms” (212/2:42), and later, from Nuenen, he comments on the “tone” of a letter from Margot Begemann (465/3:180) and decides not to send a letter to Theo because it is “either too bitter or too tame” (472/3:190). Commenting on one of Van Rappard’s letters, he says, “I infer more from it than you imagine you put into it” (176/1:297), and in a similar vein, he advises Van Rappard that by “calmly reading or re-reading my letter,” he will come to see that Vincent is not the enemy, despite the fact that “I occasionally address you in what are possibly coarse and harsh terms” (184/1:313).

In these examples, Van Gogh is responsive to tone and implied meaning and to how words might convey more than an author intends — how rereading can disclose dimensions of language that might otherwise pass unnoticed. Also, he recognized that good writing is as demanding and difficult as good painting. Thus, he tells Bernard, “It’s as interesting and as difficult to say a thing well as to paint a thing” (599/4:61), and he suggests to Wil, “I’d also like to see if I can’t make my own portrait in writing” (626/4:132). He seems to have known very well that the care and practice that lie behind good painting are also required for good writing, which, at one point, he thought of taking up professionally (710/4:341). Certainly, as the above examples show, he was alert to the complexities of language in excess of what might
appear to be plainly stated, and his understanding of such matters is evident in how deliberately he gauges the tone and register of his letters to fit the recipient.

The simple conclusion here is that despite his spontaneity and disarming forthrightness, we should not underestimate Van Gogh’s writerly skill. Thus, in the excerpt that we have considered in some detail, we found ourselves wondering how deliberately Vincent was manipulating Theo and playing upon his sympathies while keeping the other elements of the letter in balance. Although this question cannot be clearly resolved, I am inclined to think that Vincent was very much in control of a nuanced range of effects and that in the repeated injunctions to Theo to become a painter, he knew very well that he was playing upon Theo’s conscience. Yet Vincent was also lonely and worried about the future. I therefore wish to stop short of accusing him of cynicism, even though the manipulative undercurrent to which I have drawn attention does seem to be part of the author’s intent. Throughout the letters, similar subtextual provocations are repeatedly at work, allowing us insight into a complex personality that we might feel ourselves coming to know increasingly well and yet that remains elusive after all.

So far, I have focused on such matters as nuance and implication to indicate Van Gogh’s writerly self-consciousness. But it would not do to ignore the fact that he is frequently the opposite of nuanced — which is to say, he can be offensive and combative to the point of embarrassment. For instance, he declares from Nuenen that Pa is “not good,” and “I am utterly against him, absolutely against,” because he is “stubborn,” “dark,” “narrow-minded,” and “icy cold” (415/3:85–86). There is plenty of this kind of vehemence, which caused Theo to react by accusing Vincent of being “childish” and “shameless” (197/2:15), and even “cowardly” (413/3:82). In turn, Vincent could be unpleasantly blunt and aggressive with Theo — for instance, denouncing his “cold decency, which I find sterile and of no use to one” (432/3:113) and assuring him, woundingly, that “you don’t in the least belong among the rising men now” (527/3:276). Elsewhere, he tells Theo, “I don’t find you natural” (419/3:93) and, moreover, “you are cruel in your worldly wisdom”
He doesn’t hesitate to conclude a passionate request to Theo for money by resorting to emotional blackmail: “before you strike the blow and chop off my head and Christien’s and the child’s too . . . sleep on it again” (227/2:73). That is, if Theo holds back on the money, he will be punishing the mother and child as well as Vincent.

Still, Vincent is often affectionate, eagerly looking forward to Theo’s visits (250/2:115) and appreciative of them afterwards (253/2:125). He is touched by Theo’s confiding in him (312/2:267) and by his brotherly love and kindness (760/4:431), as well as by the special bond of friendship between them: “For I’m right in thinking, am I not, brother, that we aren’t just brothers but also friends and kindred spirits” (186/1:307).

As these examples show, Van Gogh’s opinions, whether negative or positive, are often wholehearted, and we need to acknowledge this strand in his writing as well as the complex, self-reflexive one. Much as in his paintings, the interplay between contrary elements provides his art, whether in print or words, with a special energy. With these observations in mind, let us now return to Vincent’s close but often uneasy relationship with Theo.

“Two Natures”: Art and the Family Name

As we have seen, Vincent counted on Theo to understand and support his choice of a vocation. At the same time, by making such a choice, Vincent declared his autonomy, setting himself at odds with his parents, with whom he nonetheless maintained deep emotional ties. And so Theo was the man in the middle, at once Vincent’s brother and friend, sharing both a close family bond and a dedication to art — which is to say, a set of values transcending family ties. As I have pointed out, because Vincent depended on Theo for money, he knew there was a risk in criticizing his parents too severely or too often in case he alienated his brother. But neither could Vincent surrender his core conviction about his vocation, of which Theo approved sufficiently to supply a monthly stipend. Perhaps the single most interesting aspect of the long correspondence between the brothers is how
Vincent manages the searching horns of this dilemma: in so doing, he combines something of the boldness and subtlety of a matador, albeit fashioned for the contest with a pen, while exercising the range of effects I have described — by turns spontaneously direct and self-consciously nuanced.

When Vincent returned to Nuenen in December 1883 to live with his parents, he was experiencing guilt about abandoning Sien and resentment against his father and Theo for their part in breaking up the relationship. His letters during this period are often testy, and at one point, as Vincent continues on the warpath of recrimination and self-reccrimination, he tells Theo: “I see as it were two natures in you, struggling with each other within you — a phenomenon that I also see in myself” (417/3:90). Vincent goes on to describe these two natures as an opposition between the “humane” and the “cruel” and expresses regret that neither he nor Theo had chosen the better part in their dealings with Sien. By extension, the idea of “two natures” struggling within the brothers can also indicate something of the conflict between obligation imposed by conventional family values and the transcendent ideals that call upon individual conscience and autonomous choice. Vincent’s relationship with Sien brought this conflict into sharp focus, pitting the conventional values of his parents against the ideal of selfless love and service about which Vincent wrote with such intensity and eloquence, as we saw in chapter 1. But, as ever, Vincent’s idealism encountered the rough shock of the negative contrast provided by his actual circumstances, not least when these circumstances forced him back into the family home and to a re-engagement with emotional complexities from which he had sought so energetically to extricate himself.

To a remarkable degree, Theo is a sounding board for Vincent’s conflicts, anxieties, and frustrations about such matters. For instance, in The Hague, Vincent worries that he might have offended Theo on a recent visit and is concerned about “a vague feeling that I must have bothered you with something, because there seemed to be something the matter when you left” (375/2:403–4). Vincent goes on to refer to a remark Theo had made to the effect that he (Theo) was “beginning to think more and more like Pa” (375/2:404). The implications of this
remark, together with the “vague feeling” of having done something to upset Theo, cause Vincent anxiety, which he then tries to allay. Thus, he goes on to explain that “if Pa knew anything about art” he would be easier to get along with and that even if Theo did, in fact, become more like Pa, the brothers would still “continue to understand each other” because of Theo’s knowledge of art. The main thing is that “there’s a bond between you and me which time can only strengthen if we press on with the work, and that is art” (375/2:403–5).

As is often the case, Vincent is more adroit here than he might at first seem. His initial defensiveness about perhaps having offended Theo is countered by the initiative Vincent takes in response to Theo’s remark about Pa. So Theo is becoming like Pa, then? Well, Theo can’t really mean it, because Theo knows about art, and the trouble with Pa is that he doesn’t. The implication is that Pa would be just fine if he understood Vincent’s vocation as well as Theo does. Vincent therefore keeps Theo tactfully poised between the family (which disapproves of Vincent but to which he retains bonds of obligation and affection) and Vincent’s vocation (the transcendent value, autonomously chosen). But the troublesome hint that Theo resembles Pa would return in a much more vigorous and unsettling way.

For instance, during Vincent’s fraught stay at Nuenen, his discomfort quickly turned to resentment and combativeness: “At present I’m observing Pa — I see, I hear, I feel what Pa is — and I don’t like it — decidedly not.” The attack then spills over to include Theo: “If you are thus, if you’re becoming more and more thus — then it’s wise to part.” Here again, Vincent worries that Theo is aligned with Pa, and, as if looking over Pa’s shoulder at Theo, Vincent repeats the usual set of accusations against their father: he “eternally descends into petty-mindedness instead of being more open, more liberal, broader, more humane.” Then again, Vincent’s sights turn directly on Theo: “I ask you for something more personal, I ask you frankly: are you a ‘Van Gogh’ too? I always regarded you as ‘Theo.’” To emphasize the point, Vincent adds: “I’m actually not a ‘Van Gogh’” (411/3:80).

The distinction Vincent makes here between Theo in a “personal” role and Theo as a “Van Gogh” parallels the “liberal” values Vincent
espouses as a painter, in contrast to the “petty-mindedness” of his parents. When Vincent denies being a “Van Gogh,” he thereby repudiates the family connection and requires Theo to declare on which side of the fence he stands, offering even to separate from Theo and not to take money if Theo chooses against him. And yet this bold stroke is rapidly qualified by the promise that if Theo chooses correctly, he will be exposed to the improving influence of art and artists, “and in short may perhaps become squarer and broader in consequence instead of narrower and more constricted.” As the letter ends, Theo is addressed, cajolingly, as “old chap,” and Vincent extends a meek request: “if you can, see to it that I can get away from here” (411/3:80). And so, although he is prepared to push Theo, sometimes aggressively, Vincent is also wary of going too far, and in the end, he offers a conciliatory gesture.

At first sight, in this letter, Vincent seems reckless in his angry denial of the family name as a token of his own autonomy and of his desire to break free from an embarrassing dependency. But he also wants Theo to know that financial support has everything to do with the autonomy of Vincent’s vocation and is not just a handout to a dependent family member. “Theo” gives money, and that is different, in Vincent’s eyes, from Theo being a “Van Gogh.” The gruff offer to separate from Theo is therefore less risky than it might at first seem, because the letter goes on to make clear that Theo really supports values that pertain to art (Theo’s livelihood, after all) and that Theo knows will promote a humanizing breadth of vision and understanding. Moreover, Theo would surely realize that Vincent’s being dependent on his parents in Nuenen was not good either for his parents or for Vincent. In the letter, Vincent’s display of bad temper is itself a sign of this discomfort; it would therefore be good not just for Vincent but also for the family if Theo could help Vincent to “get away from here.”

Initially, then, this letter strikes us as unpleasantly aggressive, and the forceful spontaneity of Vincent’s expression of resentment arrests the reader’s attention. But the attack on Theo is also modulated by an intuitive grasp of how to appeal to Theo’s understanding of Vincent’s struggle for autonomy as an artist while recognizing Theo’s concern for
the well-being of his parents. Once again, Vincent understands Theo’s ambivalent position as brother and friend and is careful to prevent the balance from tipping too far in one direction or the other.

Another example illustrates the same set of issues. This time, Vincent begins with a conciliatory gesture, explaining to Theo, again from Nuenen, that old age has slowed their father down to the point where he can’t follow an argument any more, and Vincent doesn’t want to be picking on an old man. But then the letter takes an unexpected swerve, as Vincent turns on Theo, casting him again in a quasi-paternal role:

Going to the heart of the matter, I take this opportunity to tell you that I believe that it’s precisely because of Pa’s influence that you’ve concentrated more on business than was in your nature.

And that I believe that, even though you’re now so sure of your case that you must remain a dealer, a certain something in your original nature will still keep on working and perhaps react more than you expect. (413/3:83)

Once more, Vincent depicts Theo as having two natures contending within him. The first draws him to Pa’s world (the “influence” that caused Theo to focus on “business”). The second promises a different result, which depends on a set of attitudes to which Vincent gestures (“a certain something”) without spelling them out. Theo’s allegiance, therefore, remains once more in the balance, as Vincent works to dissociate his brother from the negative aspect of the family ties they both share while stopping short of attempting to alienate Theo from his parents. As Vincent says, everything will be fine, and “as long as it remains in balance — I’ll accept it” (440/3:138).

But the balance was not easily maintained, especially during Vincent’s difficult years at Nuenen, and Theo had not heard the last of his brother’s indignant disowning of the family name. Vincent declares, for instance, that he would rather muddle along through hard times than fall “into the hands of Messers Van Gogh” (432/3:115). And in another acerbic response to Theo, Vincent proclaims:
When I read your recent letters, what I see from them is that you’re contriving to make it seem that the whole thing is my fault if we split up. That’s such a mean Van Goghish trick, such a bit of self-righteousness, that you can have with great pleasure if you’re attached to it.

Pa would do the same — I know for myself how I’ve felt for the last year and what thoughts I have about your friendship. As it now is, intolerable. (436/3:128)

Vincent goes on to propose that it would be better to break off relations, even though, “particularly in the financial sense, I will consequently have absolutely nothing else.” He then draws Theo’s attention to the fact that such a bold but honest proposal is “the opposite of the usual tactics of Messers Van Gogh & Co.” (436/3:128).

In this passage, the family name occurs twice in a negative sense, and to the charge of “self-righteousness” that Vincent associates with the family in general, he adds an accusation of deviousness, describing Theo as “contriving” to place the blame on Vincent. In the absence of Theo’s letters, we can only speculate that he called Vincent’s bluff about earlier suggestions that Vincent and he part company. Ironically, Theo’s taking seriously the suggestion to “split up” is interpreted by Vincent as devious — “a mean Van Goghish trick.” On the contrary, however, we might find Vincent’s praise for his own boldness less than straightforward. That is, although the friendship with Theo is described as “intolerable,” Vincent hastens to say that this is the case “as it now is” — a qualification that suggests it need not, in fact, be so. And Vincent also makes sure to remind Theo that if they were to part company, Vincent would be entirely without financial support. He therefore does not bravely shut the door on Theo at all but rather appeals to Theo’s conscience by way of a suggestive hint and a well-placed reminder. Once again, family loyalty (with Theo continuing to be aligned with Pa) stands opposed to Vincent’s commitment to his vocation. But although Vincent accuses Theo of self-righteousness and of colluding in “Van Goghish” tricks, he also wants to reawaken his brother to the alternative, which, again, he describes as “friendship.”
A similar pattern of aggression and conciliatory second thoughts occurs when Vincent once more identifies Theo’s interests with Pa’s. In a previous letter, Theo had described himself as “suspicious” (482/3:204) of Vincent’s attitudes and motivations. Vincent seizes on the word, repeating it several times as he objects to the accusation. Suspicion is “a dark glass one looks through,” and Vincent does not want to see Theo’s character “set in that mould”: “I’ve a history like that behind me with Pa — I’m not starting on a Pa II” (482/3:204). Here, Theo is insultingly referred to as a possible “Pa II” so that he will feel the weight of Vincent’s many bitter comments about their father transferred to himself. The remarks about the “dark glass” and being set in a mould confirm this identification because of Vincent’s repeated comparison of his father to things that are obdurate and hard and to a “black ray” (415/3:86). Then, as in our previous example, Vincent rapidly shifts gears and attempts to turn insult into virtue by commending himself for plain speaking: “So don’t take it amiss that I now say foursquare what I think about it” (482/3:204). After all, he is only being honest, and, in turn, this self-exculpation opens the way to a further gesture that invites Theo’s indulgent understanding: “For the rest, old chap, I think I’m working rather too hard.” Theo’s attention is now brought back to Vincent’s hard work and admirable dedication as a painter. In a previous paragraph, Vincent has already paused to reassure Theo that “I take pains to improve my work” and to regret that Theo had not sent a copy of the magazine, L’illustration, featuring Renouard, “which I think you would also have been delighted with” (482/3:204). After this digression, the scolding attack on Theo is promptly resumed, culminating in the remark about “Pa II.”

My point here is that in the middle of a letter in which Vincent supposedly is speaking “foursquare,” he is careful to pause in order to bring Theo back to the world of paintings. In the process, he makes some learned references, consistent with his habit of citing books and paintings as a way of elevating the topic under discussion. Thus, L’illustration and Renouard remind Theo of where Vincent’s values lie, anticipating his conciliatory tone at the end of the letter, and are introduced to guide Theo back yet again to Vincent’s dedication as a painter.
(“I take pains to improve my work”). Vincent goes on to express regret that he is a financial burden and suggests that his harsh language in the letter is really intended “to put an end to the possibility of quarreling.” He explains that “even the possibility of quarreling ceases to exist as soon as I find a means of covering myself financially. Then my work will no longer be an issue, and at present it still is” (482/3:204).

As ever, anxiety about money surfaces as a main concern, as Vincent attempts to secure Theo’s support despite the hostility to Pa. The intensity of Vincent’s reaction to Theo’s “suspicious” attitude is both a protest against what Vincent maintains is an unfair accusation and the expression of an almost bullying anger meant to put Theo on the defensive. The notion that Theo might become “Pa II” is especially upsetting for the dependent Vincent, yet even as he proclaims this opinion, he takes steps to deflect it by reminding Theo of the high value that attaches to Vincent’s vocation, transcending the entanglements of family obligations and loyalties. The bold accusation that Theo is behaving like “Pa II” is clearly meant to disconcert Theo; it is, however, also qualified and contained by a more circumspect rhetoric designed to confirm Theo’s support for Vincent’s autonomy, yet without denying that both brothers share a complex family history that also makes claims upon them.

By the time Vincent went to Arles, his father had died and Theo had come to recognize that his brother’s talent was indeed special. In turn, Vincent had become more tolerant of the commercial aspects of the art business, which he now offered to promote alongside Theo. In a touching letter written from St. Rémy to his mother about his illness, Vincent reflects on Theo’s generosity:

You and Pa have been so much, so very much to me, possibly more even than to the others, and I don’t seem to have had a happy nature. I started to realize that in Paris, how much more than I Theo did his best to help Pa practically, so much so that his own interests often went by the board because of it. That’s why I’m so thankful now at present that Theo finally found a wife and is waiting for his baby. Anyway, Theo had more self-denial than I, and that’s deep in his
character. And when Pa was no longer with us and I went to him in Paris, then the poor chap attached himself so much to me that I came to understand how much he had loved Pa. (831/5:170)

There is some delicacy in these words, in which Vincent ruefully acknowledges not having “a happy nature,” and, by contrast, praises Theo’s exceptional care of their father, which Vincent only came to recognize fully after Pa died, when Theo transferred the same affection to his needy brother.

Clearly, the letter is meant to be consoling to Vincent’s mother, and Vincent is intent on being ingratiating, as well as offering reassurance. Yet in light of the passages we have been reading, the description of Theo’s loving self-sacrifice divided between Pa and himself is especially interesting. Now that Pa is gone, Theo’s affection is transferred to Vincent, and here again, we recognize the two-fathers motif, except that Vincent is now, ironically, himself like “Pa II” as the recipient of Theo’s special care and attention. This affirmation of family bonds is calculated to build some broken bridges with his mother, as Vincent proposes that in Theo’s eyes, he has, as it were, stepped into Pa’s shoes. Mother might perhaps be swayed by the beloved Theo’s discernment of Vincent’s good qualities. But, as the excerpt makes clear, Vincent’s remark pertains also to Theo’s marriage and impending fatherhood, which cause Vincent to feel “thankful,” even though these events actually led him to re-experience some old anxieties. Just as he saw Theo as torn between Pa’s world and his own, so he would come to see Theo as torn between his wife and child and Vincent’s continuing needs as an artist. The present excerpt does not deal directly with this further complexity, but despite Vincent’s attempt to be gracious, the writing ripples with tensions as he attempts to negotiate the difficult topic of his father’s death, his mother’s resentment of her wayward son, and, again, Theo’s difficult position balancing Vincent’s need for support with his own family obligations. Finally, in the depiction of Theo as a “poor chap” who “attached himself” to Vincent after Pa died, we might detect the echo of an anxious hope, an almost forlorn plea, that the attachment will continue.


Congratulating Theo (Almost)

As the letters tell us, Vincent was simultaneously pleased about his brother’s marriage and concerned about becoming a drain on Theo’s resources now that Theo had a wife and child to support. And so the old struggle between dependency and autonomy would continue to the end. Consider, for instance, the following (almost) congratulatory message written from Arles to Theo on his upcoming marriage:

Now the main thing will be that your marriage isn’t delayed. By marrying you’re putting Mother’s mind at rest and making her happy, and anyway what your position in life and business rather necessitates. Will that be appreciated by the society to which you belong? Perhaps no more than the artists suspect that from time to time I’ve worked and suffered for the community . . . So from me, your brother, you won’t wish for the absolutely banal congratulations and the assurances that you’ll be transported straight to paradise.

(741/4:397)

Although Theo’s marriage is welcomed, Vincent’s first reason for being pleased is that the marriage will make Mother happy. It will also be good for Theo to be married because of his “position in life and business.” Vincent then points out that as an artist, he has suffered and been ignored despite being virtuous, suggesting, by way of a somewhat clumsy analogy, that Theo’s real virtue will also go unnoticed by the world at large. And so Vincent will not offer Theo the usual “banal congratulations” because both brothers know that in a heartless world, virtuous actions are often unrewarded.

We might wonder what Theo felt about such a hedged and qualified message of congratulation; he would probably have recognized a familiar pattern, with Mother now replacing Father as the representative of the commercial interests and respectable society that, in Vincent’s opinion, are about to make a permanent claim on his brother. Consequently, instead of feeling any straightforward gladness for Theo, Vincent finds a way to remind him — yet again — of the neglected
artist who (it is implied) also needs support, Theo’s new family arrangements and duties notwithstanding.

In later correspondence, Vincent’s conflicted feelings continue to be evident. Consider this further, hesitant congratulation:

A few words to wish you and your fiancée much happiness these days. It’s like a nervous tic with me that on the occasion of a day of celebration I generally experience difficulties in formulating a congratulation, but it shouldn’t be concluded from that that I desire your happiness less ardently than anyone else, as you well know. (754/4:421)

If Vincent had let the first sentence stand on its own, the meaning would have been straightforward. But no, he proceeds instead to add a strained explanation about why he is not more effusive in his good wishes. As a result, he draws attention to a problem that would not otherwise have arisen and that, to make matters worse, he immediately tries to dismiss. That is, Theo should not think that Vincent was wishing him “happiness less ardently than anyone else.” But there would be no reason for Theo to think this had Vincent not drawn attention to it in the first place. Vincent’s reassurance could therefore only prompt Theo to think that maybe Vincent was, in fact, less than wholly enthusiastic about his brother’s new status. Although there is no reason to doubt that Vincent was glad about Theo’s happiness, the complexity of his feelings about the matter is evident. ¹²

A final example will confirm how persistently ambivalent and anxious Vincent was on the topic of Theo’s new domestic arrangements. In the following passage, written from Arles, Vincent comments on how he has preserved his own “integrity” by not using Theo’s firm, Goupil, to promote his work, except indirectly by way of accepting Theo’s stipend:

You’ll have been poor all the time to feed me, but I’ll return the money or turn up my toes.

Now your wife will come, who has a good heart, to make us old fellows feel a bit younger again.
But this I believe, that you and I will have successors in business, and that precisely at the moment when the family abandoned us to our own resources, financially speaking, it will again be we who haven’t flinched. (743/4:402)

While commending his own integrity, Vincent affirms Theo’s self-sacrificing support and willingness to be “poor all the time to feed me.” And so the emphasis falls on the value of Vincent’s vocation, despite the fact that “the family” did not provide financial support.\(^{13}\) In this context, the sentence about Theo’s wife having “a good heart” is especially telling. Although Vincent expresses hope that she will “make us old fellows a bit younger again,” his words carry a trace of anxiety that Theo might now have outgrown his youthful enthusiasm for Vincent’s career. Vincent doesn’t want Theo becoming an older, respectable family man who might think twice about supporting his reckless brother. The anticipation that the new wife will make both of them young is therefore an indirect way of expressing the hope that Theo will go on being supportive. The final words of the excerpt (tactfully delayed) press the point: “it will again be we who haven’t flinched.” That is, despite the new family arrangements, the old collaboration will hold fast. And so, again, Vincent’s appreciative affirmation of Theo is not without concern that family obligations might prevent him from supporting Vincent’s vocation. Vincent sees Theo as situated uncomfortably between two poles and feels a need to affirm Theo’s family connections even while inviting him to transcend family ties in support of a higher ideal.

In the previous examples, I have dealt only with a cross-section of the remarkably flexible and nuanced rhetoric by means of which Vincent conducted the often turbulent relationship with his brother. This relationship was driven by Vincent’s enduring anxiety about money, but I have not dealt directly with this endlessly repeated concern or with the recurrent complaints about illness that run through the letters as a kind of accompaniment to the worry about financial matters. Rather, I have been interested in some characteristic strategies by means of which Vincent negotiates the claims and counter-claims
of his autonomy as an artist in relation to his often uncomfortable dependency on his family. I would now like to end this chapter by looking briefly at one aspect of Van Gogh’s writing that has been largely ignored in commentaries on Van Gogh but that pertains to the main points I am trying to make, both about his versatility and writerly self-consciousness — that is, his humour.

**Getting a Perspective: Van Gogh’s Humour**

In his early correspondence, Van Gogh’s sense of humour is less pronounced than in the letters written after he went to Arles. As Wouter van der Veen says, Van Gogh’s reading reflects the fact that after he went to Arles, he did not engage in the same intense manner with the religious and moral issues that had preoccupied him earlier. Instead, he turned to authors who were amusing, satirical, or escapist — for instance, Daudet, Voltaire, Verne, and Loti. Likewise, during this period, his own writing is more often than before satirical and humorous, partly out of a sense of fun but also as a means of deflecting the most distressing aspects of his illness. As with his references to Dr. Pangloss, Van Gogh’s humour was a way of taking his mind off his suffering. It also helped to promote and encourage an easier, more accommodating attitude to his family, consistent with his realization, noted in chapter 2, that painting was not, in itself, sufficiently sustaining.

Certainly, Van Gogh approved of humour and recommended it. Writing from Arles, for instance, he reminds Theo that “one mustn’t forget completely how to jest” (768/4:60) and how to maintain “our good humour” (790/5:64). In 1887, he confides to Wil that for a period of years, “I completely lost all inclination to laugh”; by contrast, he now needs “above all to have a good laugh” (574/3:369). Again, writing to Wil in 1890, he says, “One really must be able to laugh sometimes, and make merry a little or even a lot” (856/5:204). Earlier, writing from The Hague, he apologizes to Theo for not expressing himself “more entertainingly” (357/2:362), and he commends Russell for being able to add “a gay note” to his “conceptions of a higher order” (598/4:60). He also adapts his
sense of humour to different audiences. For instance, he is caustically amusing with Van Rappard in describing Joseph Stallaert, a teacher at the Brussels Academy: “it would be difficult to convince me that His Hon. has no damnably bad side that eclipses his Hon.’s possibly good qualities” (178/1:300). He is ruefully self-deprecating in explaining to Theo that he won’t go to the tropics because he is too old, “and (especially if I get myself a paper-mâché ear) too jerry-built to go there” (743/4:403). And with Bernard, he is unguardedly ribald: “Rubens, ah, there you have it, he was a handsome man and a good fucker” (655/4:218).

From early on, he could be amusing at his own expense. For instance, he remarks on “the politeness of the populace of The Hague towards painters” when someone, “probably from a window, suddenly spat a wad of tobacco onto my paper — life can be very trying at times” (262/2:150). Here, indignation is tempered by a wry attitude that allows Van Gogh to assume some perspectivizing distance on his own discomfort, as he concludes, in a tone of mock resignation, with “life can be very trying at times.” In the same letter, he expresses amusement at the comment of a passerby that “he’s drawing the horse’s backside instead of doing him from the front,” upon which he remarks, approvingly, “I rather enjoyed that comment” (262/2:150). But he could also be caustic, as when he agrees with an opinion in a novel by Zola to the effect that commercial enterprises now are ruled by “Swinery & Co. everywhere” (286/2:204). About Rubens, he says that even the great painter’s “most beautiful heads of a weeping Magdalen or Mater Dolorosa” (552/3:339) remind him of nothing more elevated than a prostitute who has caught a venereal disease. His friend Mourier’s accent is transcribed with some playful but not entirely benign mockery: “He bropaply alvays trinks brendy viz vater” (623/4:118). Likewise, while in The Hague, Vincent, in a half-jocular manner, challenges Theo to go ahead and cut his stipend “and chop off my head and Christien’s and the child’s too,” adding, “preferably not, I need it for drawing. (And Christien and the child couldn’t pose without heads)” (227/2:73). Although this manages to be at least somewhat amusing, the humour is tempered with a steely aggressiveness that is not entirely pleasant. The same tough sense of fun is evident when Theo is assured that having an argument with Julien
Tanguy’s “poisonous” wife is more than any “mortal should be obliged to do” (637/4:164). Van Gogh even sees something amusingly bizarre in his own obsession with painting: “like hunting rabbits for the crazy people who do it to distract themselves” (645/4:190). Elsewhere, he enjoys the risqué contradiction in his invitation to Gauguin “to resign himself to living like a monk who’d go to the brothel once a fortnight” (616/4:100). And in response to the petition by his neighbours in Arles to have him confined because he could not control himself, Vincent tells Theo, “I bluntly replied that I was entirely disposed to chuck myself into the water, for example, if that could make these virtuous fellows happy once and for all” (750/4:415). Here, Vincent’s mock compliance — his willingness to drown himself so that his neighbours will be rid of him — is itself an example of the neighbours’ concern that he was mentally unstable. His mock-madness would, if declared to them, no doubt further alarm the “virtuous fellows” even as it offered to reassure them — except that Vincent knows that the reassurance is itself fake, set out ironically in a letter for Theo. There is some witty complexity in this expression of Vincent’s exasperation, but his humour could also swerve towards cynicism. For instance, on the topic of Theo’s marriage, he asks Paul Signac how to deal with the “funereal pomp” of the ceremony, including “those pharmacist’s jars where antediluvian civil or religious magistrates sit.” He goes on to conclude that Theo is “married alive on the low heat of the aforementioned funereal receptions” (756/4:424). Amusing, yes, but not exactly charitable, and, in a manner we will now recognize, infused with ambivalence about Theo’s marriage.

There is no simple conclusion to be drawn about the humorous aspects of Van Gogh’s writing. Still, the manner in which he uses humour can help us to see more clearly how the problem of autonomy and dependency played out, especially during the final difficult years of his life.

From early on, Van Gogh was open to the salutary effects of laughter, but in Arles, as we have seen, his humour develops in range and flexibility. Even so, laughter remains for him a complex mix of defensiveness, ironizing distance, and self-protection, paradoxically
combined with geniality, a more flexible accommodation of others, and an appreciation of human eccentricity. If we interpret these mixed effects in relation to the main topic of this chapter, we can see that Van Gogh’s humour simultaneously reflects a new openness towards his family and the contradictory fact that his solitariness was all the more emphasized by the isolation imposed by his illness. Like most of us, he never did fully resolve his personal Axial Age dilemma — the tension, that is, between the solitude his autonomy imposed and the entanglements of his family bonds and obligations. Nonetheless, his sense of humour provides some guidelines for assessing both the nature of the dilemma itself and the brave resolve with which he faced it and the contradictions it presented to him. In the end, to negotiate these contradictions, he found that he needed the geniality of good humour, as well as the protection that humour can sometimes afford.

Conclusion

In a letter written in 1883 to Van Rappard, Van Gogh complained that many friends had abandoned him and did not want to see him any longer. But “this was happily not the case with my best friend, namely my brother — for he and I are more friends than brothers — and he’s someone who understands such matters” (307/2:256). This chapter has been mainly about some aspects of Vincent’s relationship with his “best friend, namely my brother,” which endured until the end, when Vincent died with Theo next to him, a final letter still in Vincent’s pocket. I have suggested that the correspondence as a whole gives us an extraordinary insight into this relationship. At the centre lies the perennial human drama of the struggle for autonomy in relation to the family ties that bind us — ties that, ironically, prepare us for the autonomy that we can achieve only by stepping beyond the identity we have as family members. Vincent’s letters to Theo enact this struggle in a highly personal way, and with such courage, discernment, and intensity that we readily find our own concerns mirrored in the difficult, heart-rending, and inspiring story that Vincent has to tell.

A Handshake Till Your Fingers Hurt  

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In this chapter, I have also drawn attention to Van Gogh’s resourcefulness as a writer. As we have seen, the drama of his personal struggle in relation to the overarching problem of dependency and autonomy was managed with a combination of boldness and spontaneity, but also with a high degree of sensitivity to nuance and with considerable rhetorical sophistication, including an often self-ironizing humour. These aspects of the correspondence, though easily missed, can, when attended to even briefly, help to clarify how talented and versatile a writer Van Gogh really was.