

Foreword

ALTHOUGH I WAS FAMILIAR with his writing for years, I first encountered Matthew Dickerson in person in 2012 when he gave a lecture at St. Olaf College on philosophical, mythological, and philological roots of the works of J. R. R. Tolkien. In a packed room of over a hundred students, it was the best lecture I have ever heard (bar none). As he made connections between the Trilogy and Nordic sagas his audience repeatedly gasped. It was an adventure. Like that enthralling, take-your-breath-away presentation, this book is commanding for its connections and insights. Dickerson is uniquely well placed to confront contemporary mechanistic and reductive accounts of human life, because of his background in the sciences, especially computer and cognitive science, philosophy, and great works of imagination such as the epics of Tolkien. Dickerson understands the bearing of philosophical reasoning about human nature on our deepest convictions and passions. Engaging the view that we are fully determined in our action (you do not have the power to do anything different than what you are doing now) or the position that we are no different in principle from the computers we construct or imagine is to engage in positions that overshadow our sense of the heroic and our responsibility to each other. Some of these reductive programs lead us into a kind of quagmire like the sad figure describes in the French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre's novel, *Nausea*, in which he reports that he does not have adventures: "Things have happened to me, events, incidents, anything you like. But not adventures."

A close study of this book will provide you with a reliable guide to the major arguments that mark the conflicting territory in which thinkers give priority of mind over the body or give exclusive attention to the body at the expense of the mind or those like Dickerson who seek out an integrated position. In his Foreword to his Trilogy, Tolkien began by noting how an earlier tale grew to become the history of the Great War

of the Ring. In this Foreword I note that Dickerson's book relates to a war that Plato wrote about in the fourth century BCE between the Gods and the Giants. The Gods are pictured as seeking to draw us to the immaterial, whereas the Giants seek to drive us deep into the material world. In this warfare, Dickerson seeks a middle way.

The great modern philosopher Immanuel Kant criticized those of his contemporaries who approached human nature with only one point of view or one methodology (such as the physical sciences), comparing them to the one-eyed giant in Greco-Roman mythology, the Cyclops. Kant described cyclopsism as a kind of intellectual, dehumanizing disease. Dickerson is too much of a gentleman to describe any of his interlocutors as a Cyclopes. Let me claim, instead, that the author of this book has virtual 360-degree vision. He knows the natural and social sciences inside and out and has mastered the best of contemporary philosophy. I recommend this, and all books and lectures by Matthew Dickerson, in gratitude for his panoramic scholarship, deep learning, and his infectious spirit of adventure.

Charles Taliaferro

Chair of the Department of Philosophy, St. Olaf College
and author of *Evidence and Faith: Philosophy and Religion
Since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge University Press)