THE FARMER OF FLEMING

PERSONS OF THE DIALOGUE:

Ferguson, Tavares, Homeless Man

SCENE: Gilded Age Ohio

FERGUSON: Why have you come to the legislature, Tavares? I thought you were unacquainted with the political matters of the council, unlike myself.

TAVARES: I don’t plan to engage in civil discourse, as that is not my profession, for I am only a farmer of Fleming. I seek advice, in the structure of a teaching.

FERGUSON: Then this is an unfortunate collision, for I shall be departing soon.

TAVARES: And where will you go?

FERGUSON: To Columbus first, where I will stay with an acquaintance for a few nights; then I shall make my way north to Chicago.

TAVARES: What has compelled you to leave?

FERGUSON: I have been offered a position in the university there, and I shall be residing there for a few years.

TAVARES: For three years has elapsed since I became acquainted with you, and though I have not made it my daily business to know all of what you do, I would enjoy hearing of your prospect. There was a time when I was imagining running about the world, fancying myself to be well employed; I say that I still have those dreams. I thought I ought to do anything rather than be a farmer.

FERGUSON: Then I shall tell you when the meeting occurred and I had learned of the university’s request:—

In my boyhood, around the turn of an adult, I had won a prize with my first tragedy, which I had submitted in response to a panel of the state. The panel then issued an invitation to a symposium in Columbus, where I was to share my tragedy to a large group of men and women, whom all had much more to say than I. Yes, they were authors and poets and playwrights; and I was but one boy who had written a single tragedy.

And what was this tragedy about, was it autobiographical?

“Yes indeed,” I replied as I told Mr. Wright, the representative of the symposium;—I was a little fellow, who never wore any shoes, Tavares. It was quite a dichotomy, between me, the presenter at the banquet, and the audience that in large counts yielded from the corporate, collegiate and government incumbencies. Then, said Mr. Wright, let us have the tale over again; is not this event just made for conversation of venerated work? And so I talked, and talked of discourses on my assiduousness to crafting the tragedy; and therefore, even as a boy lower than the rest, I was not ill-prepared to comply with their request. For to speak or to hear others speak of their works and stories always gives me the greatest pleasure, so say nothing for the profit.

And then, there was a reporter who caught a sight of me from behind, calling out to me in the distance, and he said: Ferguson, O remarkable, halt! So I did as I was bid; and then he said he was looking for me and now he might ask if I was interested in pursuing the constant practice of writing tragedies, among other stories, at a university. I thought his narrative was very indistinct, but soon, once I had returned to Fleming and my apprenticeship for a legislator, I recevied a letter. It was a large, clean paper, with a smooth stamp from a dean, he was of the University of Chicago. The writer reiterated the answer I had given to the reporter and continued upon the inquisition of my deliberation, so I agreed to the request of my presence. I shall be going there soon, which is what I have just told you.

TAVARES: No more of that, Ferguson. Let me renew my request that you would answer my question of being able to guide me, just as the legislator had done for you.

FERGUSON: Well, the time is late, but if you are acquainted with the political art, then I shall endeavor to advise you, and make you a better man than a farmer. What are your expectations in using the advice?

TAVARES: To secure a position in the political bureaucracy, I suppose. A historian or scholar or ambassador.

FERGUSON: And what birthed your aspiration, or what force inspired you to act valiantly and seek an apprenticeship in legislation and politics?

TAVARES: The aspiration came from my parents: my father, Meletus, and my mother, Ophelia. They began the prosecution after developing great distress in Fleming, believing that agriculture is an unsustainable living and that it is nearly inevitable that I will fall to poverty.

FERGUSON: The best of Tavares does not even have his own ambition. By God, the political standing is higher than that of the fields; and the proper catalyst of ascension is one’s ambition. However, as the catalyst is bound to your father, and not yourself, the virtues associated with ambition are no more present in you. By logic, Tavares, you are unethical, for you lack courage in the Artistotelian sense, temperance from pleasure, and the vast multitude of other virtuous attributes.

TAVARES: I shall know better. But my state of inaction, as you have described, does not imply a complete absence—

HOMELESS MAN: Forgive me for impeding your saunter, is it possible that I receive some bread or drink?

TAVARES (remains silent as conversation never came as a natural trait to Tavares): …

FERGUSON: Of course. Please, take this and feed yourself.

HOMELESS MAN: By the powers, I thank you. Oh! You must be Ferguson, the politician. Ferguson, the great, would be a more suitable moniker that better emblemizes your insurmountable victories in the legislature. You bravely fended off Ramiro, Ranald the Confusing and Cadman the Relentless, that was a sobriquet I created for his verbal impiety.

FERGUSON: You are too kind.

HOMELESS MAN: Rare friend! You are too modest.

FERGUSON (chuckles upon the response of the unnamed man): Very humorous? Oh, the sun is sinking and soon my guiding light shall fall to darkness, I must move along.

HOMELESS MAN (walking away): Of course.

FERGUSON: Close doer of evil! Tavares, rhetoric is but another domain, similar to ambition, in which the common virtues are catalyzed. Rhetoric is wielded by strong-willed men to evangelize their ideals. Rhetoric requires courage to persist in debate, and temperance from appeasement. Silence is the opposite of rhetoric. The weak men default to silence, and cower away in their own reality. They do not serve their society, they are selfish men! Are we to say that you could not converse with the unnamed man?

TAVARES: I had some difficulty, Ferguson, but I also can not say that it was necessary to.

FERGUSON: Then you are merely a young man who is little known, and you lack the virtues required for politics or any more grandiose occupation. Those with no ambition and no adroitness in rhetoric displeases me, and I pity you who are my companion, because you think that you have been doing something and are fitting to do more when in reality you are doing nothing. I certainly know you now and you should think of me—there is a difference.

TAVARES: I see, Ferguson, that you are not the same—for you are of greater evil; and I do believe that you are misguided and with minimal wisdom, you will assail me, which, however deserved, I know you have not acquired a genuine sense of what is good and bad, just and unjust, honorable and dishonorable.

FERGUSON: If you have nothing to do, I wish that you would tell me what is your morality, exactly as you can, I shall endeavor to prove your wisdom refutable.

TAVARES: I have nothing at all to do; after all, that is what you said about me. I will gratify your wish. To talk of my philosophy is always the greatest delight to me, whether I remind myself of it or let another hear me speak.

FERGUSON: To be sure, Tavares.

TAVARES: Therefore, I adjure you to tell me the nature of good and evil, or piety and impiety.

FERGUSON: I am not a philosopher so I should not know.

TAVARES: Are you a theologian?

FERGUSON: Very true.

TAVARES: Of what creed; is it the Christian creed?

FERGUSON: Indeed.

TAVARES: I am not too familiar with its ideals, but is it true that any action that is natural is pious, where natural dictates accepting by God?

FERGUSON: Yes, Tavares.

TAVARES: And we may find actions that can be deemed as natural and pious and cherished by God in the natural state?

FERGUSON: I am not sure what you mean.

TAVARES: Remember that you said what is good is adjudicated by God, so we shall discuss the state of nature, where God is most supreme. Of course with faith you may say that the divine is always supreme.

FERGUSON: Yes, I think so.

TAVARES: But if you were to shoot me right now, or if you were to become too angered with me to the point in with you are in a fit of drunken passion and you were to quarrel with myself, then as a result you would slay me, and probably bound me hand and foot and throw me in a ditch, who would you be sentenced to, a court of God or a court of the state?

FERGUSON: The latter, Tavares; it is most definitely the state.

TAVARES: Because the government is tasked to secure domestic tranquility among its citizens?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: Then, we must look to another time of another instance, where there is no bureaucrat of man, but of God only in himself: a time of no government of men, but only a government of nature and the divine. And here, where the people of the world can look up to the sky, look out toward the sea and the forests and the fields and stare directly into the works of God, and in this mighty sweep earth, there would be no intrusive sign of man nor the handiwork of man. That is what I say to mean the state of nature.

FERGUSON: Very well.

TAVARES: Is it possible, Ferguson, for man to organize into magnificent societies or corporations, that will revel at the earth with their high progress? Certainly not, unless many men willingly submit themselves to a few, as in the other (and more probable) circumstances, there is nothing to entice men into order—they shall be ignorant of each other and aware of themselves only. And all their actions will be of an inherent essence, is that agreeable?

FERGUSON: I suppose so.

TAVARES: It is certainly so, for nothing adheres men to each other; men will be loyal solely to nature and God.

FERGUSON: How lucky I am for you to have extracted that response! You say that man acts inherently and within himself, but then you swear just ago that man is influenced and governed by God. At any rate, this is a contradiction!

TAVARES: Now, Ferguson, what are spirits and God and nature, are they men?

FERGUSON: Most certainly not.

TAVARES: May you converse with nature? And if you do, will nature converse with you?

FERGUSON: No.

TAVARES: That is because nature and God is external to man, it is not man and will never be. You have put this into the indictment because you have nothing real of which to argue me. The only feeling of nature, if it has feelings at all in our perspective, would be indifference. Following this, I presume you have an elaborate defense regarding the perspective of God on man, and you shall ask, “Well, Tavares O deme of wisdom, if God is indifferent and apathetic to the actions of man, how is he to determine what is good and what is bad?” To that, I should say that the indifference does not influence man in any accustomed manner: so that all our actions are composed of only our desire. And God does not judge man when he is in his mortality, but only when he has left the world and transcended into a far more virtuous or far evil life, which is not the subject of my philosophy. Would I, as only a man, concern myself with the afterlife and the departure of our current existence, and care to attempt so long to define what is right and wrong there, in that unknown plane?

FERGUSON: I think not.

TAVARES: Then let us proceed. It is irrefutable that in any world, there is both pious and impious work; and let me remind you that this is appraising action with regard to ethics or the unethical, not the instinct of survival or any other exertion that is unrelated to moral contemplation.

FERGUSON: That is true.

TAVARES: So we may discount a list of many endeavors, such as drinking from a lake or constructing a shelter, and many others?

FERGUSON: Yes, Tavares.

TAVARES: Yet we account for murder or temperance, as an example of respective impiety and piety; or arson and humility?

FERGUSON: I would say so.

TAVARES: And we have said that actions in the natural state are inherent, for they are limited to the confines of one’s own desire and thoughts, and not of any others or even of nature itself?

FERGUSON: We have stated such.

TAVARES: Then there shall be only inherently good actions, and inherently bad actions?

FERGUSON: Yes, that is the dichotomy.

TAVARES: This is the sort of distinction which I meant to raise as to create a premise, which we shall yield to when examining other actions. I now ask whether the inherent action—inherently good and inherently bad—is the purest form of action; I remark this because the action arises entirely of the man himself, and therefore is not subject to the whims and doings of the extraneous world, and this class of endeavor will provide the clearest depiction of one’s morality. Do you dissent?

FERGUSON: No, I think that you are quite right.

TAVARES: I wish to reaffirm a few deductions: if man of a grotesque appearance; such that he consumes as if he had a beak, and he had long and unkempt hair, and a beard which is ill grown and indistinguishable from select fauna; were to by some dedication attempt to remove his odious disposition and resist his indulgent urges that he may satisfy in privileged earth and nature, this would be ethical?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: Because it has arisen within himself, and we may know that his spirit has been the compeller and has overcome himself and to engage his mind is strictly toward temperance and asceticism?

FERGUSON: Of course.

TAVARES: Then, because the action of the man is inherently good, and you have declared it ethical, may we establish that an ethical action is that which is inherently good?

FERGUSON: Quite true.

TAVARES: Very good, Ferguson; you have now given me the sort of answer which I wanted. Additionally I can tell that you hold truth in the deduction, although I make no doubt that you may desire to refute me later.

FERGUSON: Upon your view, I affirm it as I believe I have a new defense.

TAVARES: And what is the indictment?

FERGUSON: Have you forgotten the evil men, whom would conquer the homes of their more placated species? You have stated that there are both inherently good and inherently bad actions, what is the result of the latter, which you have not provided for?

TAVARES: I shall now progress to greater evolution, as I speak toward the contrivance of governance. It is plausible to articulate that the entire previous, paradisal reality, where man lived off the gods with infinite privilege, may exist only in theory. Now, I will incorporate the possible influencers that are very much a reality: like natural hindrances, the anger of the gods, perhaps, or possibly an inflamed persona that has developed among a few inhabitants as an uncontrolled extension of their indulgence, which can characterize the inherently evil.

FERGUSON: Yes, those would occur.

TAVARES: Ferguson, what do you posit would occur among man given the lack of natural goods?

FERGUSON: They shall formate into factions and inevitably war with each other.

TAVARES: But do we currently live in a world of war and factionalism?

FERGUSON: No; our society has order, which hails from the laws of the state.

TAVARES: As in the example I aforementioned, where you had taken upon a drunken rage and endeavored to leave me in a ditch?

FERGUSON: That is the one.

TAVARES: And may the benefit of society be observed in civilizations of the past, which no longer stand today?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: Such as the many great kingdoms of Europe? England, France, Prussia? That I would assume. What about the eastern states; the magnificent dynasty of Qing or Meiji’s empire?

FERGUSON: All of them, yes.

TAVARES: Would the dogmas of Mr. Hobbes and his Leviathan summarize what we are discussing?

FERGUSON: Certainly.

TAVARES: As “To resist the sword of the commonwealth... no man hath liberty; because... liberty, takes away from the sovereign, the means of protecting us.”

FERGUSON: That is an expression which you may use, if you like.

TAVARES: Because on the topic, it is the state that puts an end to the war of the natural state?

FERGUSON: Quite so.

TAVARES: And it creates society? And it governs with laws?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: So security and protection from the state is an allurement that brings men together? And as a result they are no longer ignorant of each other, as what nature had pressed?

FERGUSON: I should say nothing to be clearer; many men live among each other.

TAVARES: Now I confer a sort of question which I meant to raise when I asked what is moral and immoral: is there a distinction in the behavior of the many, who now exist in an organized state instead of the unruled nature?

FERGUSON: I am unsure, so I will ask for you to endeavor to explain.

TAVARES: Well then, my dear friend Ferguson, do tell me—were not the actions of the natural state inherent in form?

FERGUSON: Yes, of course.

TAVARES: And its inherence arises from man living and adhering not to a state of man, but a state of nature?

FERGUSON: I remember it now, Tavares; and nature is far removed from man, and therefore it can not influence man to act.

TAVARES: We shall know that the inherently good action is the ethical action?

FERGUSON: Of course.

TAVARES: Then, as you requested I explain, with man being and living and working in a society, with a government not of God or some other being that man may only know indifference, but a government of their own kind, would not the actions be of less inherence?

FERGUSON: Yes, I should say that it is less inherent, which is the difference of the essence of action.

TAVARES: Then would not a good action, which is now not as inherent, be not as ethical?

FERGUSON: I say that it is.

TAVARES: And so all the actions of men who inhabit a society, that attempt to do good, would not really be ethical?

FERGUSON: I suppose.

TAVARES: What an extraordinary confession! By what you have stated and which you have repeatedly affirmed on the count of each of my inquisitions, your ambition, which you have said to be ethical as it is composed of many virtues, will now not really be ethical, and will only be of more deformed moral structure?

FERGUSON: Logically, that is true and I assent.

TAVARES: I will not persecute you to any great extent, so for now I will inquire of the bad: would a bad action, in a society, be not inherently bad?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: And there may be many influences and affections that compel a man to do bad?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: So that is the purpose of the judiciary, is it not? To examine the extent of a certain action’s evil, and to create proper punishment?

FERGUSON: That is the purpose.

TAVARES: I think that you understand now.

FERGUSON: But there is a void, which you have not endeavored to discuss, and if you do not, it may curse your philosophy with weak legs and deter any who seek your sense of wisdom.

TAVARES: What is this void?

FERGUSON: We surely can not merely designate the flaw of mankind to man living among each other. Is being influenced always an evil?

TAVARES: I shall know better, my good friend, so that in a little while you may understand. Do you have the time to hear my statements and be fully instructed in my morality, so that you will no more admonish and chastise me if I refuse to speak or act with ambition?

FERGUSON: I would like to hear your imaginations and innovations in philosophy, I have become your disciple for the night. But do not hesitate, for tomorrow, I will be meeting with a man and conversing with him about my transition.

TAVARES: Will it be early?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: What is the exact time?

FERGUSON: When the dawn breaks.

TAVARES: Then I should most definitely speed my explanation, though I myself will still be in bed; and whereas you will be fully conscious in planning your prospect, I will be unconscious and hopefully undisturbed even by dreams.

FERGUSON: And now, if you please, let us return to the point of the argument at which we digressed.

TAVARES: Very well. Ferguson, what does man desire, the good or the bad?

FERGUSON: Certainly the good, and not the evil.

TAVARES: And this is because the desire that is good benefits him?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: And the evil harms him?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: And would you say that there are some goods which are mightier and holier and more desirable than others?

FERGUSON: I am not certain, so I ask that you give an example.

TAVARES: Would bread, which can satisfy hunger, not be comparable to a cake, which not only makes you satisfied but it will do so out of pleasure?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: And money, which in itself is fiat, is a good that is used to obtain other goods, such as food and drink?

FERGUSON: That is true.

TAVARES: Then what is the general idea which makes these things wanted and all things that are said to be wanted fitting of its description? Do you not recollect that there was one idea which made something desirable and undesirable?

FERGUSON: I will tell you, if you like.

TAVARES: I should very much like.

FERGUSON: All goods that are desirable make the person—who possesses the object—happy.

TAVARES: No doubt, Ferguson; but do you admit that these goods make the body happy?

FERGUSON: It does.

TAVARES: And though it is a welcomed sensation, is not the pleasure of the body ephemeral, and it always leaves?

FERGUSON: That is true.

TAVARES: So would happiness in the mind be more indissoluble than happiness of the body, for happiness originates in the mind; and so when happiness comes from the body, it does not reside for very long in the mind, which we perceive as happiness leaving. But if we make our minds happy, then happiness will stay, as we are shifting the source of our thoughts and reactions to a more joyful perception.

FERGUSON: I say that is true.

TAVARES: And would that not be the goal of a philosopher: to find happiness in the mind?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: I believe you realize this idea among several men, who have put themselves to the task of finding happiness in the mind. The Buddha called it nirvana; the Hellenics called it ataraxia. And they have transcended the happiness of the body, so that they are not solicited by colorful feasts and are only drawn toward philosophic contemplation?

FERGUSON: That is what I know.

TAVARES: I dare say; and you shall tell me if you concur, that there are very few of us who have truly and deliberately sought happiness in the mind, and the many have sought happiness of the body.

FERGUSON: I agree.

TAVARES: That us good, Ferguson; yet still there is a little point about which I should like to have further information. Where do the goods come from? I think that the goods come from nature, as nature provides us comfort and abundance. Is it not so?

FERGUSON: Certainly, it is so.

TAVARES: Earlier, you said that in the natural state man lives off nature. Ostensibly, then, that is where the goods arise from?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: And now tell me, is the dogma of men in nature to seek the goods of nature because the goods provide happiness; and nature will be the cause of fruition for these goods.

FERGUSON: I stoutly affirm that.

TAVARES: Is this like an animal, as animals live to consume from nature and the sweep of God?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: So when man adopts this doctrine, he is essentially an animal?

FERGUSON: Yes, man was more primitive and arboreal, so that would constitute closer toward an animal.

TAVARES: But now we are evolved?

FERGUSON: Definitely.

TAVARES: So our primary instinct is no longer what nature provides, as that is what an unevolved animal thinks of?

FERGUSON: True.

TAVARES: As oxen only think of grass?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: And I also conceive that a horse only thinks of feed and hay?

FERGUSON: Also that.

TAVARES: Then, Ferguson, in our evolved and more civilized nature, which we have characterized as a society, the work of God has been institutionalized to be under the rule of bureaucrats and the state? That is true. And instead of the natural world, we are faced with the world of man and his creation: industrialism. Where there were once fields, there are shops; where there were once mountains, there are now corporations; and where there were once unknown phenomena that were attributed to great heroes of the skies, there are now politicians.

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: Again, we talk of the goods. Because nature is subject to the regulation of the state, we no longer desire its goods, but we change our view toward the world and the goods that manifest in it.

FERGUSON: I am not sure what you mean, Tavares.

TAVARES: If our goods once came from nature, which is what we adhered to and lived among, are not the goods in a society meant to originate from other men, which we now live among?

FERGUSON: I think that is true.

TAVARES: Do you know what the good is that can be attained from other men is?

FERGUSON: I do not.

TAVARES: Well, the good must provide happiness?

FERGUSON: Of course.

TAVARES: As you must leave soon, I will state the good and I would like to know your thought. I say that the good is recognition; specifically, recognition of the good (and recognition does typically connote the good), which we may call honor, while recognition of the bad, we may call dishonor.

FERGUSON: So men seek recognition from other men.

TAVARES: That is exactly so.

FERGUSON: And what will they do to earn it?

TAVARES: They will certainly act virtuously. They will act with great ambition, and will strive for temperance and courage and generosity, of which will be properly and honorably recognized.

FERGUSON: That is sensible.

TAVARES: I will say that myself, who is unambitious and has not worked assiduously in any endeavor, am not recognized. Does that support your indictment of myself, which was stated at the outset of our discussion?

FERGUSON: It does.

TAVARES: Then, this quest for recognition is present in the world where man lives among each other. And would you say that man acts with confinement to himself, or he acts with the thought of his world and society and honor and recognition?

FERGUSON: The latter, as he desires the good, which is recognition.

TAVARES: Then this not an inherently good action, but an action whose virtues arise out of the lustful fate of recognition?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: So because an inherently good action is ethical, but this sort of action is less inherent, it must also be less ethical?

FERGUSON: Yes.

TAVARES: Then I will call this sort of action a continent action, and its name will be vanity.

FERGUSON: Would I, then, be only acting in continence, and would I as a person be vain and naive?

TAVARES: Exactly so, yet you will be revered, for you live among men, and recognition and honor, are of the best goods; so that also the vain person is the greatest man. And I, who am unlike you, with no ambition in any endeavor, but living in a society of men, will be unhappy. Yet there will be thousands of millions of continent people, and a hundred thousand sufferers who have taken upon themselves the dedication of virtue, and they will be allured with the reward of recognition.

FERGUSON: Then, in an instance of an olympian, who has diverted much of his life toward a sport and has accomplished a champion feat in the face of the world, he will only be continent?

TAVARES: Yes, that would be continent, but not fully ethical. The olympian pursues the sport, and he trains himself vigorously with routine; such commitments will do him pain, yet he will persist because he abides by virtue. But what is the good that he works for—it can not be physical moderation or the aversion of gauche, as he has put himself through much struggle; no, it will be recognition and honor.

FERGUSON: And will that be the same for a wonderful musician, who will have consistently refined his adroitness in his instrument?

TAVARES: Yes. It is the fate of all of man, now sentenced to society, to live in continence and never with pure morality.

FERGUSON: We must end our talk for the time is late and I must be in a hurry and go now, but I will ask one last question: may we do good, or will man be forever subject to continence?

TAVARES: I should simply say this: that in all thy ways we act with vanity, it is only a result of our association with one another. Man, alone, will act in an inherent fashion, good or evil. Inherent evil is a result of irrationality, and the unfortunate few are cursed with that; but the general man has reason, it is what separates him from the animals, and with reason, he may do good. Though I remark, that in the name of recognition tens of thousands will follow the ideal, and there shall remain the few that will be strong enough to forego vanity for the sake of ethical action. Nevertheless, leave me, Ferguson, to fulfill my farm work, and follow wherever my mother and father lead.

THE END