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## Letter from a Harvey Mudd College Student

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I've found recently that many of my technical classes have at times become completely overwhelming in content. Some concepts which are no longer intuitively obvious and increasingly complex occupy a state of indeterminacy. They tease me by appearing at one moment to be within my scope of understanding, only at the next moment to be flying back out into vagueness with lazy, complacent ignorance flowing in to fill the void. In order to solve this problem, I have learned that when one of these ideas arrives for a brief stay in comprehension I must fasten it down. This is accomplished by harpooning it with blind acceptance of certain background information that is too tedious for me to appreciate. Much of the beauty of the concept is destroyed in the resulting mutilation and the cables holding it in place are not strong. However, they are easy to erect. Eventually, if other concepts that are founded on the one tied down grow too abstract and complex themselves, the cables will snap and the whole assembly will disintegrate and blow away.

In this intense, academic environment there is also no time for self-congratulations for a concept recently mastered. There's no time to enjoy the view from the new ledge you have just ascended to on the climb for better understanding. There's no time because at that very moment parts of the ledge are collapsing while a landslide of new information is bombarding you from above. Self-confidence is a very dangerous, unpredictable instrument in your bag of climbing tools. It should be implemented with a great deal of care. It is a balloon of delicate material tied around your waist that can give you some buoyancy to make the climb a little easier. However, a small

shard of misfortune can easily leave a gaping hole in it. New problems and tasks then collect in its empty husk weighing you down and complicating your task of learning. If you have an overabundance of self-confidence, though, your balloon provides too much vertical lift. Involved in the ceremonies of narcissism, you ignore or accidentally miss details and vital features of the obstacle you are trying to surmount. A heavy fog of conceited ignorance begins to settle over the environment, diminishing your range of sight until finally a hidden obstruction breaks your bag of hot air sending you plummeting in a freefall from which it is difficult to recover. In either case, a blessing has suddenly become a cursed burden.

So what is a student to do when surrounded by a vast body of destitute ideas all crying out for attention, and time and enthusiasm are scarce resources? Pondering the task itself for too long is enough to drive a self-wielded dagger through the toughest armors of assuredness.

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