



**THE
UNIVERSE
WE
THINK
IN**

James V. Schall

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When mankind was estranged from him by disobedience, God our Savior made a plan for raising us from our fall and restoring us to friendship with himself. According to this plan Christ came in the flesh, he showed us the gospel way of life, he suffered, died on the cross, was buried and rose from the dead. He did this so that we could be saved by imitation of him and so recover our original status as sons of God by adoption.

—**St. Basil, *Treatise on the Holy Spirit*, chapter 15**



Wherefore, we who are receiving the unshakable kingdom should hold fast to God's grace, through which we may offer worship acceptable to him in reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire.

—**Epistle to the Hebrews, 12:28–29**



All things are by Him and for Him. He utters Himself also for His own delight and sees that He is good. He is His own begotten and what proceeds from Him is Himself. . . . All that is made seems pointless to the darkened mind, because there are more plans than it looked for.

—**C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, 217–18**



Wishful thinkers love the slogan of realism—when you hear a speaker say, “Facts, gentlemen, are stubborn things,” prepare yourselves for a ramble through Utopia. In every field, the test of sanity is *what is*, in the field of human relations, the special test is *what man is*.

—**Frank Sheed, *Society and Sanity*, 3**

After they've died they'll serve as judges in the meadow, at the three ways crossing from which the two roads go on, the one to the Isles of the Blessed and the other to Tartarus. Rhadamanthus will judge the people from Asia and Aeacus those from Europe. I'll give seniority to Minos to render final judgment if the other two are at all perplexed, so that the judgment concerning the passage of humankind may be as just as possible.

—Plato, *Gorgias*, 524a



This is that conquest of the world and of ourselves, which has been always considered as the perfection of human nature; and this is only to be obtained by fervent prayer, steady resolution, and frequent retirements from folly and vanity, from the cares of avarice, and the joys of intemperance, from the lulling sounds of deceitful flatterers, and the tempting sight of prosperous wickedness.

**—Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, Tuesday,
April 10, 1750**

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Introduction

ON NOT LIVING FOR A THOUSAND YEARS

Why is my knowledge limited? Why my stature? *Why my life to one hundred years rather than a thousand?* What reason has nature had for giving me such, and for choosing this number rather than another in the infinity of those from which there is no more reason to choose one than another, trying nothing else?

—Pascal, *Pensées*, #208

Pascal inquired about a reason for the limitation of his knowledge. In what sense is his knowledge limited? And unless he already knew both that he has some knowledge and that it was limited, he could not ask this or any other question. The fact that we inquire about something means that we already have the capacity to do so. The capacity to think is already a reality in our being what we are. We did not give it to ourselves. We found it present in ourselves. And

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the other two limitations that Pascal mentioned—our stature and our longevity—are also related to our knowledge. The configuration of man’s body, the differing senses, and their location in our corpus, are designed evidently to our capacity for knowing. The normal length of our lives also indicates that while we perhaps can know almost everything, given time, none of us is ever given the years that it would take to know very many things and people. What we do know and what is there to know are not the same.

Aristotle (d. 323 BC), long before Pascal (d. 1662 AD), said that our minds were capable of knowing all things.¹ He did not say that they actually do know all things. Even the collection of all human minds through time will not know all things, though that will probably not prevent some of us from claiming that we do, or someday will, know them all by our own powers. Aristotle’s phrase remains intriguing. Capable of knowing something and actually knowing it, no doubt, are not the same thing. One of the obvious limitations on our knowledge is the amount of time we actually live in this world. Some die young. Fewer die at a hundred years. Not even the supposedly long-lived Old Testament patriarchs lasted a full millennium, though some, like the famous Methuselah, were said to have come close (Gn 5:21–27). The number of possible routes that our individual lives might have taken baffles us. After all, there seems to be an “infinity of [alternatives] from which there is no more reason to choose one than another.” Yet, we cannot go two ways at once in the same dimension. Our lives are records of the turns we made or did not make and why we made them.

This book begins by citing six passages, one from St. Basil, one from Hebrews, others from Frank Sheed, C. S. Lewis, Plato, and Samuel Johnson.² These citations are to be carefully read and con-

1. *De Anima*, III, 4.

2. The quote from St. Basil is taken from the *The Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. 2, *Lenten Season and Easter Season* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1976), Tuesday of Holy Week, second reading, 441. The quote from Hebrews is taken from the Catholic Study Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). Various translations of the Bible will be quoted throughout the text.

sidered, preferably before the book itself is read. They begin our thinking about the themes that follow. Basil, recalling Paul, tells us that a “plan” is put into existence. It is a remedial plan whereby the original disorder in human life is to be addressed and repaired in a definite way. Basil clearly expects that we already know much of our human situation from our own lives and from thinking about their perplexities. Order can follow upon disorder. Order can fall into chaos. Essential to understanding this reflection is the fact that this recurring disorder is obvious to any person who looks honestly at mankind’s and his own record in this world. In the second chapter of *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton said that original sin is the one doctrine that needs no proof. All we need to do is to go out in the streets and open our eyes.

The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of what we receive as “fire.” This is a well-chosen symbolic word. We have not only the question of how we think that we should worship God, but the more profound question of what is “acceptable” to Him as worship. We begin to wonder if anything we can come up with is adequate. If nothing we might concoct by ourselves is adequate to what is a proper worship of God, are we prepared to be instructed on what is adequate? Is there anything wrong if we are given what is true? Is this instruction what is meant by “fire?”

C. S. Lewis, in *Perelandra*, the second book of his space trilogy, spoke of the Great Dance whereby all things are resolved back into order. This dance is a joyful response to the “fire” and the glory in the Godhead, to the thankfulness and relief we feel in realizing that God already exists. We do not have to create Him. Lewis also spoke of “darkened minds” that did not or would not see this order. If we do not see the plan that is being worked out, it does not follow that no plan exists. “All things are by Him and for Him.” It is this theme that this book seeks to follow in its own way.

The test of sanity, Frank Sheed tells us, is *what is*. I have long used this very expression to indicate what exists, what stands out-

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side of nothingness. What is already there that I have nothing to do with but to know. We will, in our thought, encounter utopias of various kinds in these pages. They will not always realize their Gnostic roots that confuse ideas for *what is*. “Utopia,” the word of Sir Thomas More, has come to mean the imposition of an ungrounded idea on reality rather than a discovery of *what is* in reality. The thesis of this book is that the plan of reality that has become known to us, in both reason and revelation, is better than any utopia of our own conjecture. But individual persons can and do refuse to accept it. In part, this rejection possibility is what freedom means and must mean. The actual lives of humankind carry our ideas into history, which is the record of what happens to them when lived out. But our age is enamored with utopias that are implicit rejections of the reality that is open to us in the order of our being.

Plato will appear often in these pages. Indeed, the ruminations of Plato on justice and judgment in many ways serve as the background and foundation for all that follows. No one quite like Plato is to be found. His most famous “myths” will, at first sight, seem to be but tales to us. He was indeed most concerned by the effect on our souls of hearing the tales of Homer. But, as we read Plato again and again, his tales speak to us in a different way. If Plato is ever wrong, which is seldom, he is always very close to the truth if we follow him carefully. Our age loves justice but is bothered by judgment. Yet, justice and judgment are really two sides of the same coin. It was out of Plato’s rumination on justice, as we will suggest, that the whole transcendent order first appeared to us in an intelligible form that we needed to confront.

The final citation is from Samuel Johnson. There is no one who is so vividly articulate as Johnson is. Similarly to Plato, he had a clear insight into the human soul, where the real drama of our existence is to be found. We look everywhere outside of ourselves to explain ourselves. Johnson had a steady grasp of the human heart. He understood “wickedness” because he was aware of its charms. We know

little about *what is* if we think that evil appears to us as anything but enticing to us. Johnson connects us with Aristotle and virtue. The conquest of the world and of ourselves is the perfection of human nature. And this conquest takes discipline, penance—yes, prayer—and the rejection of both folly and vanity.

Indeed, why are we given only a hundred years, if that, and not a thousand to work out what we are? Why do we not have a regular reincarnation to try to better ourselves the second or third time around? This book, I hope, will serve to make some sense of the happy limitedness of the time we have among men. Yves Simon, in a penetrating passage, remarked that we can be ourselves only if we are not someone else.³ There is an absolute uniqueness about each of us, the ultimate origin of which is not in ourselves, though the ruling of it largely is.

The title and central theme of this book concern “the universe we think in.” Words and phrases like cosmos, universe, world, libraries, university, and *all that is* reveal to us the scope of what we are, of what interests us and what fascinates us. They point to what we must account for in some way if we would be luminous to ourselves and to others. Yet, we too, as persons, are whole worlds in our knowing.⁴ We each of us face the universe as if in some way, a knowledge way, it belongs to us also. Knowledge has that strange quality of allowing us to know what is not ourselves without changing what is there in the universe in itself. Since we can all know the same things, we can talk with one another about *what is*. It was no small thing that Adam himself was said to “name” things (Gn 2:19).

The first chapter of this book will begin with the idea that the number of human beings that will ever exist on this earth is ulti-

3. Yves Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 152.

4. See Robert Sokolowski, *The Phenomenology of the Human Person* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); David Walsh, *Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016); Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972).

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mately finite. This limit is not an accident but necessary if there are to be any actual human beings at all. The chapters that follow, in one way or another, have their roots in particularly political philosophy, as that discipline itself looks at the city and what is beyond it. When we sort things out, which is what thinking is about, we come back to Samuel Johnson's graphic expression that it is the conquest of the world and of ourselves that constitutes human perfection.

It turns out, as I shall argue in these chapters, that this human perfection from the beginning includes a gift that is already beyond human nature, though not alien to it. We are unsettled in our souls, as Augustine tells us, because, while also being made mortals for this world, we are in fact created for more than this world. "*Homo naturaliter non humanus sed superhumanus est,*" as Aquinas put it in his *De Caritate*. The human being that we actually know was not merely human in his coming to be. He was "super-human," that is to say, the actual end of each existing person is not in this world but, through it, in eternal life. Nothing else really explains the world we think in.

HUMAN DESTINY AND WORLD POPULATION

The Individual as Horizon and Frontier

Adam therefore was established in the perfection befitting the frontier of the whole human race. And so it was necessary that he should reproduce in order to multiply the human race and hence that he should take food. But the perfection of the risen will consist in a human nature coming totally into its perfection *once the total number of the elect is complete*. And consequently there will be no place for reproduction or for taking nourishment.

—Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, IV, 83

An earlier version of these considerations is found in James V. Schall, “Human Destiny and World Population: The Individual as Horizon and Frontier,” *The Thomist*, 41, no. 1 (January 1977), 92–104. The translations, in this epigraph and elsewhere, of the *Summa contra Gentiles* are either my own or quoted from *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, ed. Anton Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945).

HUMAN DESTINY

Estimates of the total number of human beings who have already lived on this planet Earth up to the present moment are, of course, highly problematic if we insist on having the equivalent of a census on the matter. Whether the number is one hundred billion more or less is not particularly pertinent to what we need initially to consider about the universe we think in. We begin with some certainty that many billions of human beings who thought have gone before us. We presume that many more will follow. Our ancestors were not all fools, backward, primitive, or unobservant, though some certainly were, and some of us undoubtedly are today.

The first thing that entered our predecessors' minds was probably not: "I wonder how many of us will finally live on this planet?" In the Old Testament, indeed, the notion of counting our numbers was looked upon as a lack of confidence in Yahweh (2 Sm 24). He was thought to provide for mankind no matter how many of them there were. In a world of controversy about resources and population, this exaggerated concern about counting may still be the case. Doubt about sufficiency of resources may still be rooted in a denial of the abundance of creation in its ability to fulfill its own purposes.

We do know that, at some point in the past, no human beings could have existed on this planet. Some popular stories on television continue to maintain that sometime in the past a rational race came to our Earth from somewhere in outer space. But the evidence for this speculation is pretty thin. In principle, the proposition that somewhere in the vastness of space, other rational races exist on some or many planets is not incoherent. Earth-like planets do seem to exist. We just have no concrete evidence one way or another. We do know that our kind finally did appear. With not a little struggle, mankind did flourish, though that word has about it overtones of more than mere existing numbers. Since we are conceived and born one by one into this world, we can affirm that what-it-is-to-be-human is found in each existing person. This ongoing reality of our mortality, of births and deaths, is what bears the presence of man in the world. Without it, we would have disappeared long ago.

More recent ecological attention has primarily been devoted not to men and women who lived in the past, or even to the roughly seven or eight billion presently alive. We now, with some concern, look upon the supposedly vast numbers who will yet live on this planet. We want to know how to provide for them. This “provision” becomes a world-wide mission. Those who come after us are the “futures,” the individual objects of “futurology” or environmental planning.

We now know, moreover, the approximate number of individuals that, severally but not collectively, could emanate from any one human couple. Several hundreds could be born of the female if each of her ova were fertilized during one lifetime. Billions of cells are found in the male. The number of human beings who actually are born is but a few compared to the numbers that are theoretically possible. The decision about which, if any, of the potential combinations of human begetting should be brought forth in birth has become a serious moral, economic, and political issue. Men now realize that the reproductive process can in part be controlled by technology, by will, by surgery, or by force.

The issue of the number of human beings that can survive or that should survive has become a critical issue. The Earth is believed by many to have reached its “finite limits.” The basis of this view derives from the level of knowledge that we now possess. We then project this level as a basis on which to decide what we can support in the future. Indeed, morality, what it is to be a good man, is interpreted more and more in terms of population density. The control of this human population is thought to be the first law of our continued existence in the world. Its urgency is claimed to be the basis for a much more dominant “world government” and for control over human lives.

Our primary enemy is often seen to be the existence of more human beings, “excessive” numbers of which must be eliminated or prevented. A kind of warfare is waged to eliminate human conceptions or to terminate them once begun before, by birth, they can break into the light of day to gain the rights of life, liberty, and the

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pursuit of happiness. We see some people justifying infanticide. Our numbers are said to conflict with our dignity, or at least the dignity of those allowed to live.

With this view in mind, many consider the human purpose to be exclusively that of transforming the Earth so that it can keep some men alive in it down the ages to come. In this anticipated world, only a steady number of human beings will be allowed to come into existence at a given time. In this view, based supposedly on estimates of resources, again based on current knowledge and technology, some one to three billion people will be allowed to exist at any given time. This limit is conceived in terms of keeping the species *Homo sapiens* alive and well-cared for in the world down the ages as long as possible. This endeavor becomes man's basic purpose of existence in order that the ones allowed to live might flourish.

The focus is on the collectivity or species, not on the individual person and his destiny, which now appears to be irrelevant. The individual is expendable and has no transcendent purpose. Ultimately, those who do not fall within the limits of this planning have no "right" to exist. They threaten the limited collectivity that the Earth allegedly can support. Some of the justification for space travel and research, moreover, is to find a place in the cosmos for the species to continue to exist when this planet becomes uninhabitable as a result either of human consumption or of natural exhaustion of resources.

At first sight, such contemporary issues do not appear to have anything to do with the thinking of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. Yet, especially in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, several remarkable discussions are found about issues that have now been secularized and politicized. Indeed, the form in which these notions of ultimate numbers and purposes appear today is the direct result of the rejection of basic values and positions underlying the thought of Aquinas. The rise of what is called "political theology," with its primary emphasis on this world, so strikingly absent in Aquinas,

flows almost directly from de-emphasizing the human soul. The final location of each man's beatitude is related in Christian thought to the bodily person it animates, not just to the soul or body as separate entities.

Aquinas never doubted that the number of human beings to be created over time was itself limited (*Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 23, 7). But the notion that social ethics could be reduced (or nearly reduced) to a goal of keeping alive a fixed number of men down through the ages would have seemed to him to be a skewed revival of Greek biology. In this latter view, the individual exists for the species. The immortality of the species, not of the individual, is seen to be the purpose of reproduction. The individual exists only for the species. He is not directly willed except in collective terms. It is surely of some moment that this view can be now proposed as an alternative morality to that envisioned by Aquinas. He held that morality was based upon the free creation, election, and personal destiny of each human person. Each person transcended the species in its destiny and purpose.

The *Summa contra Gentiles* was written especially for a non-Christian and non-Jewish audience. It appealed directly to men who had only their humanity, hence their reason, in common (I, 2). The structure of the *Summa contra Gentiles* is global. It seeks to establish the nature of God, man, and the universe. It locates and defines each man's ultimate happiness. This endeavor leads Aquinas to the famous position that every man contains within himself all the intellectual powers needed for his knowing of reality. Each person is himself a whole. He is complete in what he is. This completeness includes his knowing what is not himself.

Thus, man is open to all knowable things and therefore to God (II, 59; III, 84). The end of any intellectual creature can only be to know God. This knowing and being with God is the purpose for which man was created (III, 25). In all of creation a freedom is found: the world need not have existed at all. Every existing being

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bears the mark of “need not have been but is.” The actual world was not from eternity (III, 23; I, 81).¹ The plan of the universe, then, is achieved when, through Christ, real men—body and soul—are actually able to attain or reach a full life with God (IV).

Undoubtedly, at least for many modern men, one part of Aquinas’s teaching is difficult to accept. Aquinas holds that each member of the human race, which has a historical existence in time, can in his individuality achieve full beatitude. He can know God. He does not “become” God. He remains this man. This position is what ultimately constitutes or grounds the dignity of the person. But this completion is not something solely out of man’s direct human activity, nor is it merited by the individual or the whole human race. At all levels, it partakes of gift and freedom. It can be rejected and probably is rejected often enough in human history.

That predestination and election do not find their cause in any human merits can be made clear, not only from the fact that God’s grace which is the effect of predestination is not preceded by merits but rather precedes all human merits . . . but it can also be shown from this, that the divine will and providence is the first cause of things that are done, but that there is no cause of the divine will and providence. (*Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 163)

This view, of course, does not deny that men actually have something to do in the universe.

Secondary causes are real causes. Things do happen, change does take place because of them. The reality of these causes does directly confront any proposition that would locate human happiness and destiny outside of what is ultimately possible only with God’s graciousness. We are warned, in other words, against defining man solely in terms of his worldly condition and its temporal succession. We are also warned against defining him exclusively as a “soul” whose rela-

1. See also Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995). This book explains why the world is the result of a creation that happened, but need not have happened: the world itself, even in its necessary laws, need not have existed.

tion to a body is merely mechanical or even an impediment. The body and soul form one personal being.

The last chapter of the *Summa contra Gentiles*—"On the State of the World after the Judgment" (IV, 97)—is, at first sight, a curious mixture of medieval astronomy and theological speculation. It seeks to justify the continuation of man in the universe after he is no longer subject to these celestial motions that supposedly caused or influenced his begetting on Earth. The import of the considerations, in other words, is explained by how men in a resurrected state survive when the present conditions of the cosmos no longer obtain. For Aquinas, there are things made *ad perpetuitatem*, made to last forever, though they have a beginning. Among these are the souls of men by which they transcend the universe itself. And in the Christian dispensation, the body shares this destiny also, even though God must supply what is lacking to it—*Deo supplete sua virtute quod eis ex propria infirmitate deest*. This higher destiny is the result, furthermore, not of some natural self-transcendence but of the concrete history of salvation to which this race of men is subject and in which it appeared and in which it continues to appear.

This background leads to two observations that are especially relevant to the way in which the contemporary problem seems to be working itself out. The first is that Aquinas regards the number of human beings on this planet to be limited. The goal of man's existence on this planet, however, cannot simply be the multiplying of the number of souls *ad infinitum*. The infinite is contrary to the nature of a goal. In an infinite sequence with no definite end, nothing of ultimate significance really happens. But nothing unfitting follows if we posit that, when mankind has reached a certain number, the motions of the heavens will cease.

Just what should determine this completed number is disputed, as Aquinas notes in the *Summa theologiae* (I, 23, 7). God knows the number both materially and formally; that is, He knows the total number and each individual person comprised in it. Physical

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creation of the cosmos is ordained to achieve man's purpose. The cosmos has no other intrinsic purpose. More particularly, this purpose pertains directly to those who choose God within the confines of history. Aquinas suggests that God does not directly choose the number of the damned. They also make up part of the universe's total numbers. If God were to "choose" the damned, it would imply that God directly decided their fallen lot, which is not the case. Their fallen-ness, if it happens, is their own choice, even if they did not choose to exist in the first place. The initial existence had to be a gift. What is not cannot choose to be. Once it exists, it can decide what it ultimately desires to be.

And what is this total number? Aquinas cites various speculations. It is equal to the number of fallen angels (itself not so easy to tabulate!), or to the number of angels created. But he is skeptical about all this speculation. "But it would be better to say that God alone knows the number of those chosen for supernatural happiness." Evidently, we do not need to know the details of everything given to us. If we are told what we need to know, it is probably enough for us. But it is true that when we think of such questions as why we do not know everything, we learn much about ourselves and the extent of our reason.

What should be emphasized—this is our second observation—is that the ultimate number of human beings is limited *because* actual men are in fact to reach their end. This end is seen to be the personal vision of the Triune God and nothing less. This end relativizes any ethic that conceives man's corporate function on Earth as that of preserving himself, either individually or corporately, for as long as possible. Standards and values that define man's dignity and destiny can become subject to this continuation or sustainability ethic.² For Aquinas, it is the other way around. The preservation and develop-

2. See James V. Schall, "On Sustainability," *The Catholic Thing*, April 28, 2015, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2015/04/28/on-sustainability/>; "The Divinization of the Earth: A Religion without God," *Catholic World Report*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.catholicworldreport.com/2015/08/06/the-divinization-of-the-earth-a-religion-without-a-god/>.

ment of the natural and Christian ethic is that according to which we should order our lives in the world.

Yet, seeking to know all things, all earthly things, is precisely the normal function of the human intellect with respect to its immediate object. The ideal that is often proposed for the Earth, its preservation as a natural place of beauty and abundance—the Garden of Eden myths modernized, so to speak—is also present in Aquinas. But again it is posed as a problem that concerns the ultimate status of physical creation. “Since, then, corporeal creatures will ultimately be disposed so as to fit the condition of man, not only will the condition of man be freed from corruption but it is also necessary that even corporeal creatures in their way participate in the glory of the (divine) refulgence.” These are, in fact, the last words of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, except for the brief citation from the *Apocalypse* (Chapter 21) and *Isaiah* (Chapter 65) about the new heavens and the new earth. What is noteworthy here is that the kind of thinking that Aquinas applies to the state of things after the general resurrection and judgment is now more and more directed to a this-worldly fulfillment, to a “modern project.”

The pertinence of what we have been considering can be seen very clearly if we recall Aquinas’s views about sexual activity after the *Parousia*. This view is of special interest because recent proposals also tend to eliminate sex as a means of reproduction or at least to restrict reproduction so severely that it has little to do with most actual human lives. Any sort of “sex” is encouraged provided it does not have any relation to reproduction, its original purpose. Homosexual or intrinsically non-reproductive relationships, however formulated and carried out, are intrinsically sterile and not ordered to reproduction. Hence, they are not “sexual” in the proper sense. Cloning proposals likewise eliminate the connection between birth and sex altogether. Those cloning procedures refashion the human corpus so that no really new person will result in the normal succession of uniquely new individuals. The clone, if it comes to be,

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will conceivably have matter, a history, and presumably responsible choices.³

Aquinas held firmly that there would be no reproduction of new human beings after the resurrection of the body. Our contemporaries insist that no more children ought to be reproduced than are needed to maintain the total number of desirable members of the human race. But for Aquinas the reason for excluding further human births was that all men at the same moment were to be resurrected and to experience the *Parousia*. Were any children to be conceived after that time, they would escape the condition of the finite historical race of men to whom salvation is promised and for whom it is achieved in the Redemption of Christ (IV, 83, 88).

Several characteristics, however, were to remain after the resurrection, as these are essential to the person. For instance, after the resurrection, women would understand better that they were created to be less strong than men, and that that difference is, in fact, a good thing. The relative weakness of the feminine sex is part of its beauty and elegance. “Similarly, also, the weakness of the feminine sex is not excluded by the perfection of the risen. For this weakness is not a departure from nature but intended by nature. And this very distinction of nature in the human race will manifest the perfection of nature and the wisdom of God, disposing all things in a certain order” (IV, 88, 3). For the risen, Aquinas calmly rejected the notion—practically required today—that personal relationship or enjoyment apart from reproduction would justify sexual relationships. His reason is that each person on reaching his final goal, when the universe reaches its final purpose, would not need to experience a lesser pleasure, especially one without its own natural purpose. Aquinas is very much of the opinion that men are created for ultimate happiness and that they do achieve it if they will accept the path in which it is offered to them.

3. See James V. Schall, “On Reconstructing Mankind,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, September 27, 2016, <http://www.hprweb.com/2016/09/on-reconstructing-mankind/>.

Aquinas also held that it was the purpose of the intellect to know all things that are there to be known. Our intellect then is in potency to know all the forms of things, and this potency is actual when it knows any one of them. Therefore, it will not be totally in act nor achieve its ultimate end until it knows all things, or at least all material things. But man cannot accomplish this goal through the speculative sciences by means of which we know the truth in this life. Hence, the ultimate happiness of man cannot be found in this life (III, 48).

From a contemporary point of view this passage is significant for another reason. The current secular and ecological argument for severely limiting human numbers is based largely on statistics of natural resources. Such resources are believed to be in short supply in comparison with population estimates. Rapid or steady population growth, it is held, will soon exhaust natural resources, so that men will reach the secular apocalypse to destroy themselves precisely by “increasing and multiplying.” Most such dire predictions, however, are themselves products of the philosophy that defines man’s purpose as a continuance of the species down the ages.⁴ The level of scientific development upon which such calculations are based, furthermore, is very narrow. It does not allow for even the present powers of the human intellect to develop ways to meet man’s needs.

In reality, only one “natural” resource exists in the universe. What counts is not what exists but how something exists and what we can do with it. This resource is the human mind—as already implicit in Aquinas’s definition of the intellect as that faculty open to all being. In a real sense, it is possible to transform anything—except the human person—into something else. Resources are not limited in any meaningful sense compared to human population. People can, of course, always refuse to do what they are able and competent to do. Such reflections would suggest that the Earth is adequate for

4. See Julian Simon, *The Ultimate Resource 2* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

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its purpose, which is to minister to a finite number of persons who are in the process of achieving their transcendent purpose. Aquinas again places the ultimate realization of all knowledge beyond this life. This position suggests that the race of men is not, in fact, likely to achieve in history all that it could achieve or to use up all the resources originally provided for it by nature. At the end, we will find things left over that might have been used. The time of the end and the full usability of resources are not necessarily commensurate.

Aquinas held that the number of human beings to be created was itself limited. Moreover, the fact that he spoke of the number of the *elect* suggests that this number is determined rather by the personal drama of each created person in selecting his own destiny. He makes this selection within whatever historical social order he might find himself. The *Summa contra Gentiles* does not deal with destiny of nations or with other collectivities like civilizations and cultures. What divides men ultimately and even in this world is their moral and spiritual character. Indeed, the rubric of the *Summa contra Gentiles* that seems to bear most directly on the subject before us is the following: “That happiness does not consist in worldly power” (III, 31). Aquinas is mainly concerned with showing that, because of its intrinsic instability, earthly power cannot be that which men ultimately seek.

If some power is the highest good, it must be the most perfect. But human power is the most imperfect, for it is rooted in the wills and opinions of men, in which there is the greatest inconsistency. And the greater we think a power to be, the more things it depends upon. This belongs to its weakness, since what depends on many things can be destroyed in many ways. The highest good for man, therefore, cannot be worldly power. (*Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 31)

The ultimate purpose of man governs what he does with his temporal existence and not vice versa. The proposition that we must change our morality and our being to conform to earthly exigencies is what needs to be rejected. Our good consists in our efforts to be the kind of persons that God created us to be.

Modern thought strives to restrict human purpose to the earthly enterprise as such. It finds our meaning in the whole temporal sweep of things, within which individual persons are but passing moments. This approach consistently ignores the fate of individual persons who alone have transcendent existence and ends. Persons are very easily subordinated to the collectivity and its supposedly higher mission. Precisely because Aquinas did not seek human meaning ultimately in some form of worldly state or society, however defined, he could concentrate his attention on the meaning of each person as such—“If then the body of the risen man will not be composed of this flesh and these bones of which it is now composed, he will not be numerically the same” (IV, 84). This passage again recalls the centrality of the resurrection of the body in the order of things. The unity of this body and this soul as a complete human person after the resurrection completes God’s purpose in creation. What follows is eternal life for each in the midst of all within the Trinitarian life of the Godhead.

It is to be noted also in this context that a line of what is called trans-human thought has rejected the utopian and ecological notions that man’s end is a society in this world, but down the ages. Rather it seeks to overcome the death of the individual. Death is the real enemy. In this sense such a view is also a secularized Christian projection. What counts is the individual, this individual. So technology should work to keep this (any) person alive. He is to be ageless. What counts is only this individual person. There is no death. Benedict XVI looked at this view in *Spe Salvi* (#41–45). He thought that this view of an ageless worldly life with no death was closer to hell than to any human ideal. What is interesting here is that the doctrine of the resurrection of the body has now appeared as a scientific project to keep each individual in its present bodily configuration to be permanent, immortal.⁵

5. See James V. Schall, “On Being a Person,” *The Catholic Thing*, December 20, 2016, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2016/12/20/on-being-a-person>, on the relation of trans-humanism to postmodern scientific views.

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The destiny of mankind, with its completion and its numbers, must be seen from the viewpoint of what does happen. Men, persons, do die. God, the soul, and, as related to them, the body and the universe, are ultimately permanent. Recent theorizing about the implications of population often, paradoxically, takes up, in relation to the present condition of man, questions that Aquinas saw must be treated in relation to the *Parousia*; and it is in light of the *Parousia* also that we consider the final destiny of sex and reproduction, the relation of the human intellect to knowing all corporeal things, the number of human beings, and the purpose of human creation.

In the prologue to Aquinas's *Commentary on Book III of the Sentences*, we find the famous passage: "For man is a sort of horizon and frontier of the spiritual and the corporeal, a sort of medium between them, participating in both corporeal and spiritual good things." This statement means, of course, that the authentic values and destiny of the Earth are indeed man's to accomplish. Man is the horizon and the frontier. The completion of human numbers is a definite project. Yet, we must recognize that it is men's relation to what they themselves are created to be, and not the supposed carrying capacity of the planet, that is the primary factor that decides how many humans there will be. Furthermore, human numbers in Aquinas are never seen to be a question of numbers as such. They are seen as the *universitas* of persons who achieve the goal for which the universe was created. That is, the free choice to respond to God's invitation to participate in His inner Trinitarian life.

The immanent meaning of the world—the "hominization" of nature, even the peaceable kingdom—is not the essential drama, though it is the context of human action. The "horizon" of man in all his numbers, in all his accomplishments, is always God. "The end of the divine law is that man adheres to God. . . . Human laws, however, are ordered to certain earthly goods" (*Summa theologiae*, II-II, 140, 1). Even with the best of earthly organizations men may not re-

ally be achieving the goal to which they, as persons, are invited and called.

Reflection on these teachings of Aquinas on human ends and human numbers reminds us today that when questions that pertain to the *Parousia* and its condition reappear in essentially secular and political guise, it means that we are losing contact with the radical destiny to which the individual person is called. His end does not change if he chooses not to know it or accept it. Christianity's validity as an explanation of things and as a truth, as the *Summa contra Gentiles* seems to argue even from natural reason, is precisely the refusal to allow men a lesser destiny than the highest to which they are called. This end must include the happiness of the single, individual person, or else it is merely an abstraction and not a hope. Contemporary speculation on human population and the ramifications of human sexuality should not be taken for less than what it is—an effort to provide answers to ultimate questions solely within a this-worldly context.

It is not enough to maintain that the answer cannot be found here, in the world, no matter how long the world lasts or in what conditions. We must also recognize that the very effort to subsume these questions into a manageable technological or ecological perspective is resulting in a refusal to accept man as he was created—and his destiny *post iudicium*. And it is this choice to accept the human condition as such that defines this particular human race's hope to escape nothingness—though not solely by itself, of course.

We live in an age that exalts human enterprise yet fears to accept its conditions. The new “original sin,” ironically, has almost become—what it was not for Aquinas—sexual activity that increases population. Perhaps the last words in this initial chapter should be those of Aquinas: “Humility is essentially located in the appetite inasmuch as by it one restrains the impetus of his soul from inordinately seeking great things, but it has its result in knowledge, namely, that one should not esteem himself above what he really is”

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(*Summa theologiae*, II-II, 161, 6). We are told not to esteem ourselves more than we are. Yet, we are ultimately *given everything*. This is the mystery that is being worked out in history, and beyond it, when the prescribed number of men will be complete—*certo numero hominum completo*.

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On What Is Entrusted to Man

Anselm's formula, *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking intelligence), before being the program for the human knowledge of God, is thus the rule for the gift of God to man. In the latter case, one might translate Anselm's dictum as "*What God entrusts to man demands human intelligence.*"

—Rémi Brague, *The Law of God*, 262

"What other sophist, then, or what private conversation do you think will prevail in opposition to these?"

"I don't suppose that any will."

"No, indeed, it would be very foolish even to try to oppose them, for there isn't now, hasn't been in the past, nor ever will be in the future a character so unusual that he has been educated to virtue in spite of the contrary education he received from the mob—I mean, a human character; the divine, as the saying goes, is an exception to the rule. You should realize that if anyone is saved and becomes what he ought to be under our present constitutions, he has been saved—you might say—by a divine dispensation."

—Plato, *Republic*, 492d-e

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I

In the first chapter, we concluded that one of the things “entrusted to man” was his own destiny as a person along with the myriads of other persons who exist in this world. It was offered to him as a gift, the acceptance or rejection of which constituted the story of the personal lives of the actual human numbers who have been born or who will have appeared in historic time. Within this vast, existing cosmos of historic time we find beings who belong to it yet who also think—human beings, we call them. The act of thinking raises questions and often troubles souls. We have just seen how similar explanations can be used in different ways. What is transcendent can be considered terrestrial but only at the price of becoming something else. Thought that is oriented to wisdom guides or should guide action. Prudence, the intellectual virtue of the moral virtues, should also guide the artist to his final end. How they relate to each other provides a basis to consider why confusions about *what man is* are possible, even logical and intelligible.

On the fourteenth of December, 1950, from Magdalen College, Oxford, C. S. Lewis wrote to Sheldon Vanauken: “My own position at the threshold of Christianity was exactly the opposite of yours. You wish it were true: I strongly hoped it was *not*.”¹ We wonder why someone about to become a Christian would merely “wish” it were true, while another, in the same situation, would hope that it was “not” true. I suppose that if someone hoped that it was “not” true, he would be freed of the burden, if it is a burden and not a gift, of accepting it and living it. If he “wished” it were true, he would not be quite certain that his faith was strong enough fully to accept it as true. He both “wished” and “believed” but did not know. Faith has long been considered neither a “wish” nor a “hope” but a “knowl-

1. C. S. Lewis, *Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: Harper, 2007), III, 70.

edge” of what is indeed true, a knowledge that is based on the divine authority that sustains that truth. Except in voluntarist systems, this divine authority was not thought to be an “arbitrary” source.

The most annoying and unacceptable thing about Christianity in today’s multicultural world, however, is that it does claim to be true. This claim is striking when civil or religious laws and customs are explicitly set against its truth with its public and often private expression. The truth it claims is intended to be presented to and known as the truth by every person and culture, whatever other diversity each might have separately and uniquely to itself. The classic issue of “the things of God and of Caesar” (Mt 22:21) is by no means yet settled. Indeed, of late, it is more frequently denied than affirmed. Only what belongs to Caesar counts, and most everything belongs to him.

Catholicism in particular claims that truth exists, that it can be and is known by human reason. In affirming this fact, the Church does not claim to know everything or to know it fully. For many, this maddening affirmation does not exclude the possibility that “wishing” and “believing” truth “might” be allowed. But neither of these states of mind is possible without a fundamental starting point in *what is*, in what is true, in what stands outside of nothingness. This invitation to or claim of truth is not just one vague “religious” opinion, among which we find a multitude of competing ones, often in contradiction with each other. If truth were just an ungrounded pious “wish,” it could be written off as an aberration. We have in fact established—I use that strong word deliberately—that some undeniably true positions exist and can be affirmed. The human mind is not useless or unmoved by what it encounters in reality through the senses of the body.

In his Regensburg Lecture, in 2006, Benedict XVI made the following startling affirmation: “The fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the

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nature of faith and reason.”² What is said here does not deal with the political “separation” of faith and reason. It concerns their distinction and place within the whole of a single reality to which both belong by virtue of their respective foundations and origins in *what is*. We do not have one world of reason and an entirely different world of faith, as if one never heard of the other. Both understandings, reason and revelation, belong to the same world and, simultaneously, address themselves to each other after their own proper purposes.

Such is the import of Brague’s remark, cited above. What God “entrusts” to human beings “demands” human intelligence to make sense of its basic coherence. It would make no sense for a god to “reveal” himself to beings that could in no sense realize within themselves what is going on. Philosophy cannot say to itself that “I know nothing of revelation’s existence.” To do so is implicitly to admit that it no longer is interested in the whole to which it is ordered. When someone tries to give “reasons” why revelation cannot exist, he must do so by formulating the propositions reason claims to reject. The view that revelation cannot exist is what cuts philosophy itself off from its own object, from what everyone knows to be something that needs to be reckoned with. This “reckoning” with revelation, as it turns out, is also a task of reason. This reckoning, in the end, makes reason more itself. Nor can revelation maintain that it, *sola fides*, explains everything by itself. Revelation makes no such claim for itself. But it does find already present within its own history and text some of the most essential principles and groundings of reason.³

Rémi Brague’s translation of Anselm is thus on target. Faith seeks to be understood, not to be obscure, incoherent, or chaotic. Mystery is not opposed to intelligence but includes it in a higher

2. Benedict XVI, “The Regensburg Lecture,” par. 53. Text in James V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007), 144.

3. See Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Jesus* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007); Peter Redpath, *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Manitou Springs, Colo.: Socratic Press, 2012).

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reason, never incompatible with itself. “*What God entrusts to man,*” that is, the body or content of revelation, word and deed, demands “human intelligence.” Revelation was not intended just to sit there unexamined because of man’s laziness, ignorance, or indifference. Its inner imperative or call to be known is itself a moral provocation to the integrity of our minds and souls. The refusal to examine revelation seriously, the attempt even to make its study illegal, is already a hint that we might not want to know its ultimate reasonableness. To do so might make demands on us that we choose not to accept.

This concern might be phrased the other way around. We cannot understand that revelation has been given to us unless we have a reason why such revelation might be so given. That is to say, setting aside revelation, we need to think of what, if anything, we can figure out about ourselves, the cosmos, and God. It is not everything, to be sure, but it is not nothing either. If we have a philosophy, however, that claims *a priori* that revelation is impossible, our problem is not with revelation but with the inadequacy of our philosophic inquiry, which might prepare us, on its own grounds, to receive revelation.⁴

In the end, even with the best of our efforts, we generally arrive at Socratic wisdom. That is, we know that we do not know everything or anything completely. It is an exhilarating experience to recognize that what we already know is not everything there to be known. But we do know something, also a delight. We likewise know that we know something. We know that limits to our active intelligence exist. What we do actively know does not include everything capable of being known. Human intelligence, to its credit, has sought to know what it can know about the highest things, the first things.

Revelation, be it noted, addresses itself to everyone, even to dolts and fools, as the Psalmist called them, the ones who say in their hearts that there is no God (14:1). It addresses itself to the man with the “restless” heart and mind. It addresses itself particularly to the

4. This view was basically that of John Paul II in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*.

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most intelligent. “Can he who made the ear not hear? Can he who made the eye not see?” (Psalm 94:9).⁵ It is also designed for those who do not or will not think things through or consider how they all fit together. This is why Christ spoke in parables (see Mt 13:10). In this sense, revelation is also a judgment. The refusal to deal with it is a denial of what we are.

Usually, revelation first comes as something that is “gentle on the mind,” to recall an old song, “a tiny whispering sound,” as to Elijah (1 Kgs 19:12). It can also come, as in the case of St. Paul, by a blow or bolt from the blue (Acts 9:1–19). That is to say, it does not, even in the case of Paul, coerce the mind, but it does enlighten it. It has long been in the Platonic tradition, moreover, that the non-philosopher will not easily see the importance of truth. “Why is philosophy distrusted in the city?” is the refrain in the sixth book of the *Republic*. It is distrusted because our desires can obscure our reason. Our wants and passions hinder us from seeing *what is*. Plato rightly held that the initial role of philosophy in the city was to rule the internal order of our own souls—Man writ small. We rule ourselves so that we, not someone else, could come to some knowledge of the highest things.

God has unexpectedly, at least from man’s view, “entrusted to us” information about Himself. It is living information that we designate as “revelation” because it contains knowledge and grace that we did not and could not figure out by ourselves. Yet, we can make some sense of it once we hear it. This new or additional “information,” as I call it, is itself rooted in the divine reality made known to us in a certain way, significantly through the Word made flesh. This is what the First Letter of John is about. Revelation is known to us both in the order of the cosmos and in the order or plan found in Scripture. How the two are related is the intellectual adventure posed to us. The main reason we are not open to what is handed down to us is a dis-

5. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Résumé of My Thought,” trans. Kelly Hamilton, *Ignatius Insight*, March 2005, http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2005/hub_resumethought_mar05.asp.

ordered culture, itself the result of accumulated un-ruled personal habits that manifest the kind of persons we have made of ourselves.⁶

The reality of civil societies is grounded in the ontological reality of the multiplicity of existing persons as they pass from one generation to the next in this world.⁷ Socrates in book six of the *Republic*, as we see in the above citation, was quite clear that a major reason why we will not see order in the city is because of our own disorders of soul. He is amazingly perceptive in recognizing that any wide-scale reordering of our daily lives requires some divine intervention to enable us to see and accept what is normal and reasonable. The history of political regimes is the reflection of the souls of its citizens, as Plato suspected.

It is of further interest, as Harold Berman wrote, to realize that the political and legal principles whereby the rules of just procedure were hammered out in our culture were in fact first developed in thinking about the sacraments and the conditions for administering and receiving them. He wrote: "Law is usually associated with the visible side, with works; but a study of the history of Western law, and especially its origins, reveals its rootedness in the deepest beliefs and emotions of a people. Without the fear of purgatory and the hope of the Last Judgment, the Western legal tradition could not have come into being."⁸ These are remarkable words. The Western legal system itself arose not only from Roman law and Greek philosophy and experience, but from the efforts to make us aware of man's deeper societal vocation.⁹

6. See Josef Pieper, *Tradition as Challenge* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2001).

7. See James V. Schall, "The Reality of Society according to St. Thomas," in *The Politics of Heaven and Hell: Christian Themes from Classical, Medieval, and Modern Political Philosophy* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984), 235–52.

8. Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 558.

9. See Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960).

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II

We need to understand the relation of what it means to know and what it means to do, the relation of thought and action. Each is related to being in different ways. We probably would not bother with revelation if it did not provoke our minds as significant both to our understanding of the whole and to the way we act and live in existing polities. A marked difference between Greek philosophy and Christian revelation lies in this: the former held that few could understand the most subtle and highest things, while Christianity affirmed that revelation was to include everyone whether learned or not. The two views were not, when sorted out, intrinsically incompatible. Both were true but looked to different aspects of one reality.

Christianity remained, however, a revelation of intelligence. If it could not reasonably explain itself, it could not be considered to be true. It recognized, with the Greeks, that both an Augustine and an Aquinas were rare but welcome figures, even to the humblest of our lot. Christ taught the simple people in parables. To His disciples He spoke directly (Mt 13:10–11). It was possible to save one's soul with a low IQ, and quite possible to lose it with a high one. Indeed, Christianity suspected that this latter position, that of the learned, was, in the last analysis, the more difficult one. The Greek notion of *hubris*, or pride, was related to this view. Tolkien touched on this point: "Many are the strange chances of the world,' said Mithrandir, 'and help oft shall come from the hands of the weak when the Wise falter.'"¹⁰ The true heroes were not always or even often the learned, the talented, or the strong. Frequently, they were the simple and virtuous. The famous hymn "The Magnificat" (Lk 1:46–55) is perhaps the classic text to make this point. The figure of the Mother of God has always been based on its truth.

We can use our minds simply to know, to think, to contemplate, to "become" what we are not by knowing what we are not. We do this

10. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1977), 301.

by knowing what is not ourselves. We just want to know for the sake of knowing. We can also direct our mind to something particular, either to rule our anger or to make something, say, an opera or a chair. The latter use of the mind is called art or craft. Gradually, with each particular act, we form a habit that enables us to rule ourselves or to make things more easily. We must learn how to do something (well or badly), be it golf, carpentry, or making an engine. We make something well when the finished product is what we intended to make presupposed to some standard of excellence. Most people can make or put together many things, but they do not make them very well. One does not, however, necessarily have to be a good person to produce a good craft product, and men who made simple or ordinary products could still be good men in the sense of virtue.

Doing or acting, on the other hand, as contrasted with making, refers to the actions or the means we take to achieve the ultimate end of our lives. Was what we did itself reasonable or not? This choice of means in turn depended on the end, usually called happiness. This is the end or purpose that we had chosen to define all that we did. We had to decide what end it was we acted for—wealth, pleasure, honor, truth. Hence all of our actions reveal what we have chosen to make ourselves to be. They constitute our character, that on which we are judged. The situation is always sober, as John Rist wrote: “While ideas are indeed important, a history of ideas is far from being always a history of good ideas. Good ideas may easily be lost sight of, whether willfully or by lack of publicity. It was as true in the past as it is in the present, not only that bad ideas drive out good, but that the fortune of ideas themselves is apparently often a matter of chance.”¹¹ Not all ideas are good ideas. Both good and bad ideas make their impact on the world. Were it not so, we could not be the kind of being we are, beings whose lives and choices make an ultimate difference both to the world and to ourselves in it, and are at the same time transcendent to it.

11. John M. Rist, *Augustine Deformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 16.

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The virtue that directs our actions to their chosen final end is called prudence. The virtue that directs our power to make something with the help of our minds and hands is called art or craft. Prudence is called “the right reason of things to be done” for the end or purpose for which a person ultimately exists and by which he will be judged. Art, or craft, is called “the right reason in things to be made.” It is one thing to rule ourselves to the end of our being. It is another thing to make something well. Both involve the same power of reason used in different ways.

Charles N. R. McCoy, in his discussion of Machiavelli, pointed out that a confusion of craft with prudence is an extremely dangerous misunderstanding of man.¹² This confusion is what enables the politician to declare himself free of any rule but the success of his own political “craft.” The politician is then modeled on a craftsman making something, whereas he should be modeled on a prudent man seeking what man ought to be. That is, he ought to be someone who rules himself for his ultimate end. The politician thinks he can construct the city as an artist makes a painting. The prudent politician, however, is bound by an objective understanding of what a human person is, not by what the politician wants him to be. When action is not bound by thought about *what is*, and when politics is thought to be a craft rather than a prudence, we have no understanding of what man is. We know only what we would like him to be. We have, in other words, a city without limits.

III

Few book titles have been more tellingly cited than that of Richard Weaver’s 1948 book, *Ideas Have Consequences*. One could reverse that title with equal force to read, “Consequences result from ideas.” In this view, ideas, far from being vague, inert, neutral concepts, are

¹² Charles N. R. McCoy, *The Structure of Political Thought* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 159–66.

the main forces in the world for stability or change, for good or bad. Yet, ideas fall in the order of “formal” causality, not “efficient” causality. That is, ideas only indicate the “what” of things. Thus, they do not have any effect on the outside world unless someone decides to put them into operation. That decision is the main connection between thought and action or making. Nothing exists, not even ourselves, that is unrelated to thought. The world is, as it were, thought made visible for us to behold.

Ideas have consequences only when they become that which some agent decides to put into effect. Someone must cause them to become the form or design of an actual deed or of something to be made. All existing things implicitly have a “form” or “intelligibility” that establishes what they are as distinct from something else. This intelligibility is what the human mind seeks to know about things outside of itself.

Beyond or outside of action but existing in the contemplative or intellectual order of the mind, a “war” or lively examination of ideas does occur. This sorting out of the meaning of ideas, of what they refer to, takes place against the backdrop of the truth of things. As such, in the order of thought, it does not much matter whether anyone decides to put one or another particular idea into effect. This rumination about the validity and content of ideas, their possible effects, is what the life of the mind is about.¹³ Though books are written about it and lectures given, this war or interplay of ideas is essentially invisible, lodged in the souls of those who think them. It indicates the inner “aliveness” of human beings; what they do when they think.

What subsequently goes on in the visible world has its origin in the interplay of ideas that previously took place often centuries ago or in distant places and different languages. To assess the import of ideas, we need to be educated. We need a solid grounding in phi-

¹³. See James V. Schall, *The Life of the Mind: On the Joys and Travails of Thinking* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2006).

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losophy itself, both because of our inner desire to know the truth and because we seek to know what ideas are false and dangerous. We ought not inadvertently let ideas loose in the world. It is true, as John Rist indicated, that bad ideas can drive out good ideas. Yet all bad or erroneous ideas are presented as if they are true. We cannot escape the effort to distinguish what is true from what is not.

The motto of the Dominican Order—*Contemplata Tradere*—carries a similar notion. We can only teach or “hand over” what we have first reflected on in our own souls. Both false and true ideas can be taught, can be thought about, and can be put into effect. The contemplative side, the actual pondering in ourselves and before others of what ideas mean, recognizes that one of the major sources of the *what is done* in the world is an idea, often a bad idea. Too, we should not confuse an idea with our will or our passions that incite us to take an idea out of ourselves and put it into the world in some form or other.

We are beings who cannot fully be explained only by our reason. We also have our wills, the immediate objects of which are indeed the things our ideas present to us. These ideas, in turn, relate to *what is*, to what is not our intellects. An idea remains what it is no matter what will or desire is the impulse that puts it into existence. Once in existence, our action or thing made has its own life as an idea now embodied in a thing, in an act, in a habit or custom, or an institution, or an artifact.

How do we arrive at good ideas to carry into effect? The first thing we need to remember is that ideas, as such, are good things. That we can and do have the power to think is a good thing. We are supposed to use and use well this power that is given to us in our very nature, given by what caused our kind of existence in the first place—which was not ourselves. This point, to recall, is why Brague said that human intelligence is an essential factor in the purpose of revelation. Without mind, revelation could not be received. Moreover, we are not determined except in the sense that we seek what we call

good or happiness in all that we do. The being that each of us bears is what keeps us unsettled. We search until we find that for which we exist. This highest end is something that need not, in one sense, be ours, for it is a gift to us. In fact, it is not completed in this life. Yet, even our thinking out the implications that result from wrong ideas is a good thing. *It is good to know evil.* We cannot know what is true unless we know also what is false. Generally, many ways exist whereby either good or bad things can be brought about.

IV

The modern demand for universal literacy and education was premised on the idea that no improvement in our souls or polities will happen unless we can and do think. But we do not educate ourselves just to be educated. We educate ourselves in order to know the truth. Even the proposition that no truth exists, which undergirds so much of modern life, is, logically, a claim for truth. But this claim is not one that can escape examination about its own intrinsic incoherence. If it is a contradiction as an idea, as it is, it needs to be rejected. It claims that it is true that there is no truth, a proposition that simply cannot be coherently held. The real conclusion of the position that “there is no truth” is, ironically, that there is truth.

Yet, Aristotle, whom we have been following all along, taught that “ideas cause no action” (*Ethics*, 1139a37). What did he mean by this blunt comment? He was right, of course. Weaver’s famous phrase, as it stands, is not complete. Ideas have effects in the world only when someone chooses to use them as guides for particular actions, for doing or making something. Ideas can sit dormant for centuries hidden in some obscure book or custom with no effect whatsoever in the world. It is only when they are read again and used to guide action that their potential for consequences comes into being, when they become visible to us.

The ideas of Epicurus and Democritus, for example, were wide-

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ly known in the Greek and Roman worlds, as well in the early Renaissance. But their modern embodiment took renewed shape when Karl Marx wrote his doctoral dissertation about them. Marx had nothing but contempt for ideas that did not have the consequences that he thought he found in the Greek post-Aristotelian thinkers. He sought to overturn the priority of thought to action. He claimed action formed thought, not vice versa, as Aristotle had more correctly perceived. “For truth is the function of whatever thinks; but the function of what thinks about action is truth agreeing with right desire” (*Ethics*, 1139a29–31). In our actions, we need to will that good for which we exist in truth.

The fact that people cannot or will not come to agreement about what is true has itself caused a long controversy and concern. It has led to a despair of intellect and to efforts to find agreement by bypassing truth or reason. Love or friendliness is often proposed as an alternative. But the human mind cannot be satisfied with feeling or sentiment as a substitute for truth and the grounds on which it is based. Love and friendship are dangerous relationships if they are not also based on truth as that which binds them together. In fact, as Aristotle says, the seeking of truth and the highest things is the prime act of friendship.

“Dialogue” is another proposed method of finding truth, one with the most noble of roots. Yet, we cannot realistically discuss differences of view if we cannot honestly state what view we hold, even if, especially if it differs from what the person we are talking to holds. “Dialogue” mostly leads to an agreement not to disagree and hopefully not to fight about it. We cannot have “dialogue” when we are threatened with death, banishment, or second-class citizenship for disagreements. “Dialogue” too often becomes an excuse for prolonging or establishing relativism as the only norm of truth. Any claim to truth is itself said to be the problem. Such a view closes off discussion. Hence, the validity of any given position cannot really be brought forth.

Jacques Maritain, in his book, *Man and the State*, took up this question of dialogue that did not presuppose argument about truth.¹⁴ In the chapter on world order, Maritain proposed that men could agree on certain practical points of things to be done or made on the basis of which practical covenant they could live peacefully together. In public, they agreed not to enter into any discussion about how each different philosophy or religion arrived at these practical points. This approach was a kind of elevation of *praxis* over *theoria*. Maritain did not hold that the search for truth was unimportant. Not every explanation was feasible. The agreement to disagree and to enforce this agreement in the public order was sufficient. In retrospect, he did not reckon with some ideas that were nonnegotiable.

In the case of the discussions of theologians and learned scholars, the Church herself after Vatican II set up any number of colloquia with various Protestant bodies, with differing philosophies and religions, even with atheists and agnostics. It stipulated that these discussions should be largely private and among scholars so that outside publicity would not jeopardize the freedom of discussion. These dialogues are said to have borne much fruit, and they continue to occur. However, the Church does not “create” doctrine nor does it have control over it in the sense that it could deny what has been handed down to it. It is first to be obedient to what is handed down so that what is revealed can be present in each ensuing generation and different place. The life and teachings of Christ are what is to be made present in every subsequent time and place.

Usually, the modern initiative for dialogues comes from the Catholic side. It seems like a peculiarly Catholic enterprise. We want to know about other views; they are not particularly interested in ours. It was assumed that the division in religion or philosophy was largely a matter of not understanding another’s history or thought—an intellectual, not moral, problem. The path to agreement could be reached by patiently working one’s way through the causes, history,

14. Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

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and nature of the disagreements. While the present Pope does not minimize this ongoing effort, he clearly has downplayed the intellectual side of the approach of religion to the diversities that exist in the contemporary world.

One of the complaints heard about both John Paul II and Benedict was that they were too “intellectual.” Ordinary bishops, clergy, and laity, it was implied, could not understand their arguments, brilliant though they were. On the other hand, it was evident that the minds of these two popes were among the clearest and most incisive in the world in their time. The notion that there was a conflict between Catholicism and intelligence seemed simply uninformed. The papacy of Pope Francis has been much less centered on the connection of intellectual things. The Catholic Church has understood, as Benedict XVI pointed in “The Regensburg Lecture” (#19–20), that revelation was itself addressed to reason, and through it to all men, even the unlearned. The content of revelation had the paradoxical effect of making reason to be more itself, more reasonable.

Aristotle had long held that one’s habitual moral life, how one lived, was itself the grounding for one’s ability to know the truth. There were right and wrong ways to live. If we lived a life that was in any way deviant about any virtue, we probably would not know the truth. Aristotle also knew that ordinary people, who may not be able to give a sophisticated explanation of human or divine truth, could see what was true in the particulars of their own lives or in those of others.

Likewise, the most dangerous citizens in any polity were sophists or attractive tyrants who had some claim, though of a dubious nature, to thought. One of the most difficult tasks of a good politician was to understand this danger from thought even when he was not himself a philosopher, as few were. This is why the relation between a free academy and a polity was often so tenuous. Athens, the city of philosophers, after all, did kill Socrates, the philosopher. Christ was killed under Roman law, the most rational of the classical legal codes.

Ideas that are not true are dangerous to our souls and to our polities, whether we like it or not. Chesterton said that a slight change in Christian doctrine to forbid icons or statues, would, as in the Muslim world, destroy most every representative human art.¹⁵ The “slightly” deviant position of the Anglican Lambeth Conference in 1931 that approved birth control articulated an already begun logic, that decades later explained a world of rapidly declining populations, myriads of abortions, and the gradual undermining of marriage and the family. Aldous Huxley’s famous 1931 novel, *Brave New World*, turns out to have been in so many ways prophetic.

We not only talk of “designing” our own children, of giving them genes that are not our own, but, in the name of justice and equality, of eliminating the family altogether to replace it with laboratory-conceived and gestated children whose genetic origin no one knows. This trend originated in an idea already found in Plato (Book V, *Republic*), though he may have described it so that we would not do it. Yes, ideas have consequences. We need to know what they are and where they lead us when put in effect. To know this direction is why we are given minds. To make it actually possible, we are given wills and speech. To judge whether what we do is right or wrong, we are given reason in revelation and in nature.

I cited earlier a brief passage from Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*. Many strange things happen in our world. We see intelligent men and women put into effect the oddest things under the aegis of a freedom open to nothing but itself, to no given good. We see that “the wise do falter.” If we would know what to do when this happens we must seek a solution that the wise mostly do not anticipate or expect. But we cannot avoid what it is to be wise, or what it means when the wise betray the truth. The Tolkien tradition reminds us that the weak and ordinary can also know real wisdom and may be the real agents of providence.

15. G. K. Chesterton, “The Paradoxes of Christianity,” chapter 6 of *Orthodoxy*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 305.

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The wars of the world are first fought in the minds and hearts of the “wise” before they ever reach visible reality. When such wars do arrive in the public world, the ones who suffer most from their aberrations are usually the weak. It is in what happens to the poor and weak, to the ordinary, that we can best perceive the consequence of ideas.¹⁶ Perhaps this fact is the message that a Pope Francis stands for. When the Son of Man comes, will there still be faith? (see Lk 18:8). Will the wise all be “discussing” who He is? Whether we still will be marrying and giving in marriage, this now realistic concern is what the relation of practice to thought has to do with intellect in our time. The world we think in now includes the world in which thought of all sorts, including the most aberrant, has also become incarnate.

16. See David Walsh, *On the Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).

TWO VIEWS OF REALITY

On the World that We Discover and the World that We Make

“There are two places in which Thomas Aquinas raises the question whether revelation is necessary to come to knowledge of God. He replied, first, by affirming that there exist truths, such as God’s incarnation for example, that are known only by faith and through revelation. Second, he claims that the existence of God as Creator and Lord can be known by the natural light of reason. . . . But third, Thomas says . . . that revelation and faith are also necessary for the truths about God that are naturally knowable if these truths are to be known by everyone easily and without a variety of errors.”

—Robert Spaemann, “The Traditionalist Error,”
in *A Robert Spaemann Reader*, 39.

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According to the doctrine of chance, you ought to put yourself to the trouble of searching for the truth; for if you died without worshipping the True Cause, you are lost. —“But,” say you, “if He had wished me to worship Him, He would have left me signs of His will.” —He has done so; but you neglect them. Seek them, therefore; it is well worth it.

—Pascal, *Pensées*, #236

I

Thought and action we discover to be activities familiar to us in the universe we live in. We think about them, their distinction from one another, and their relation to *what is*. Any proper revelation given to us would appear to be gratuitous, something not due to us but still offered. We might oppose the idea that our own good might well be something that we do not wholly figure out by ourselves. It seems possible, sometimes likely, that we can reject what in fact is best for us. We know that we are not “self-caused” in our basic being. What-it-is-to-be-human is something already there before we think about it. It is not the result of our own ideas. What we are is a received idea or understanding. It becomes ours only after we realize that it is already there.

The economist Thomas Sowell gave a brief reflection on the general tenor of commencement speeches in our major universities and colleges.¹ Most addresses left much to be desired. Sowell found two general types of graduation speeches. The first type is “shameless self-advertising by people in government, or in related organizations supported by the tax-payers or donors, saying how much nobler it is to be in ‘public service’ than working in business or other ‘selfish’ activities.” To clarify the point, he added that in the view of many “it is morally superior to be in organizations consuming output produced by others than to be in organizations which produce that output.”

1. *Creators*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.creators.com/read/thomas-sowell/05/16/commencement-season>.

The second type of commencement address flatters “the graduates that they are now equipped to go out into the world as ‘leaders’ who can prescribe how other people should live.” Sowell sums up such an approach in this way: “Young people, who in most cases have never had the sobering responsibility and experience of being self-supporting adults, are to tell other people—who have had the responsibility and experience for years—how they should live their lives.” The situation gets worse later on when the said students are promoted within the government so that no one within it has ever really worked for a living. During his years in office, President Obama, who had no nongovernmental experience, issued to business and culture thousands of regulatory decrees, few of which had any specific congressional authorization or helped the economy.

It is interesting to read these incisive comments of Thomas Sowell in the light of the ongoing controversies about the purpose of higher education.² Is it to provide a “liberal education” or is it to prepare one for a job, profession, or skill? Of course, as A. D. Sertillanges said in his famous book, *The Intellectual Life*, both purposes are valid and indeed necessary. All the political candidates and even Pope Francis are constantly talking of jobs and their lack, as if providing for jobs was the primary purpose of education or of government, for that matter.

Other critics do not think that what was once called “liberal education” exists anywhere in modern universities, aside from a few relatively unknown smaller schools or isolated faculties in larger ones. Sowell’s argument was not so much about education as about how to acquire practical knowledge or technical knowledge sufficient to do the things that needed to be done or were wanting to be done in society. Experience, he implied, usually taught more than education, whereas education without experience is dangerous.

2. See Peter Augustine Lawler, *American Heresies and Higher Education* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2016).

II

In the light of such considerations, we can spell out what I call two views of reality. No doubt, we can propose many “views” of reality. The Supreme Court even went so far as to affirm that every person has a “right” to his own particular view of reality. Taken literally, since some seven billion people live on this planet, we could have seven billion different views of reality, though in fact many will hold similar views. Yet, we all live in the same world, within which we must all get along while upholding what is true. If we have differences, and we do, we have a criterion by which we can resolve them, namely, the truth of things, including human things. In both cases, the truth that we discover is a truth already there, not one we establish by ourselves.

The first view of reality, probably the current one held by most “articulate” people, particularly in Europe and America, goes by many names—multiculturalism, relativism, historicism, positivism, liberalism, or voluntarism depending on where one wants to start the analysis. This view begins with the assumed proposition that no objective natural order can be found or admitted either in the cosmos or in human beings.³ No “proof” exists for this view. It is a chosen “first principle” or affirmation for those who hold it.

Whether this view is to be considered “self-contradictory,” in the sense of affirming that “it is true that no truth exists,” can be left for private consideration. On this premise of no natural order, the world, as such, has no interior message for man that is open to his reason about *what he is*. Even mathematical and cosmological constants, the principles on the validity of which the actual world rests, are said to be accidents, not certainties that need to be explained or justified. Yet accidents themselves cannot be explained fully without resort-

3. See Robert Sokolowski, “What Is Natural Law: Human Purposes and Natural Ends,” in *Christian Faith and Human Understanding* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 214–36; J. Budziszewski, *The Line through the Heart: Natural Law as Fact, Theory, and Sign of Contradiction* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books 2009).

ing to other things that are not accidental or unreasonable: an accident is caused when the path of one purposeful driver crosses that of another, each going his own way. Nonetheless, this view claims that the result of both science and psychological introspection yields the same thing. Nothing is there but what is based on chance. All things are changing. No traces of alien or transcendent intelligence can be found in the universe or in man's structure or history.

The heart of the issue is prefigured in a brief 1953 *Peanuts* sequence.⁴ Pretty blond-haired Patty is seen happily jumping rope. From a distance carefully watching her, Charlie calls out to her the ultimate question: "Patty, do you like me?" She responds: "Of course, I like you, Charlie Brown." If we think about it, this is pretty much the same question that Christ asked of Peter after the Resurrection: "Peter, do you love me more than these?" (Jn 21:7).

In the next scene, Charlie gets to the heart of things. "Why do you like me?" he wants to know. Still jumping rope, Patty casually replies: "Oh, I don't know. Because you like me, I suppose." The third scene has no words, as no words are possible. Charlie turns away wholly perplexed but clearly catching the logic of her reply. Patty, meanwhile, goes on jumping as if no momentous issue was at stake.

In the final scene, Patty stops jumping and just stares bewilderedly at a furious Charlie, who yells at her: "THAT'S A PRETTY FLIMSY REASON." It is a reason all right, but one that has nothing to do with Charlie himself. And that's the one thing that Charlie, or anyone else for that matter, wants to know: Is there anything in us as such that is worthy of being liked and loved? And if so, from whence does it arise, surely not only from what we give to ourselves? People seem to love people even in spite of their faults and sins. Something worthy seems already present in each existing person and thing.

Behind that amusing scene lies a whole history of ancient and modern thought on love. It goes back to Pascal, Augustine, St. Paul,

4. "September 17, 1953: Flimsy Reason," *Roasted Peanuts* (blog), Saturday, January 15, 2011, <http://peanutsroasted.blogspot.com/2011/01/september-17-1953-flimsy-reason.html>.

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Aristotle, and Plato. The issue is about whether, in loving someone else, we only love ourselves. Can we wish the good of another for his own sake? Can we love someone else if we are not loved first? “Is something loveable because we love it, or do we love it because it is itself loveable?” as Plato put it in the *Meno*.

Charlie, to repeat, wants to know—this is his perpetual concern—whether there is really anything in him, Charlie Brown, worthy of being loved for its own sake? And if so, how did he come to have it? Without that possibility of loving and being loved, we are all isolated in the world of ourselves. And, as far as I can judge, this is the essence of the first view of reality that I want to reflect on. Everyone lives in his own isolated world surrounded by principles and choices that never allow him to get outside of himself. This is usually today called “human freedom” or “human dignity.” It is difficult to think of anything less desirable, if we think about it.

III

Is there anything in being itself, in *what is*, that bears its own intelligible good, its own worth? If so, if a thing is intelligible, it does not give itself its own intelligibility. It finds itself already intelligible, but not through its own making itself to be intelligible. This original intelligibility must come from what is intelligible in itself; thus an intelligible good would imply that an intelligence stands behind changing natural things as the meaningful source of what they are. Freedom in that case would mean the capacity to accept what we are in fact given to be. And we are always a “this thing” (a Fido, a John Smith) not a “that thing” (a river, a bison). We are not something other than what we are. Our good and happiness would consist in choosing to be what we are given to be, not in being something other than what we are.

What we know as modern “freedom,” by contrast, depends on the proposition that no natural order exists in things either behind or in front of them. We came from no place; we are going no place.

The world is essentially a product of chance that is “determined,” not chosen, to be what it is. No “good,” finite or infinite, exists in itself or through its presence. If the world has no intrinsic intelligibility in things, the will is not open to an objective reason, hence it is, in principle, free to do what it wants. Thus will, which we still somehow seem to possess from nowhere, is primary over reason.

Will, in this understanding, is not oriented to reality or to reason as an end. This is what voluntarism means in all its forms, whether in Western science or in Muslim thought. We are not bound by any reality, not even our own. If we were, we would not be free to make ourselves into whatever we want to be. This is why classical metaphysics and Christian theology are so dangerous to the positivist public order and why they are met with such furious opposition. The only “meaning” in the universe is the meaning we each give things, especially ourselves. No two meanings need to be the same. No given reason needs to be consistent with any other. Hence, no need can be found to have a common view of what the universe is. That would be a threat to our “freedom” to be what we choose.

Multiculturalism, as an aspect of voluntarism, means that all ways of life are equally good or acceptable, especially those ways that are said to be against the Commandments and the natural law, which presuppose reason. What were once called “sins” are now often positive “rights” to be established under laws that are accompanied by state sanctions for their violations. Therefore, all people with all their “rights” need to be mixed together in one organism or polity on an equal basis. No way of life can be distinguished or separated from another in terms of objective norms of good and evil. All people should commingle rather than keep themselves in separate, smaller enclaves or nations. Ultimately, no state exists but the world state, now in charge of all world resources and how they are to be used and by whom. All religion is subject to control according to these superior ideas about equality.

Relativism means that no truth can be found whereby we can

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distinguish one position from another in terms of right and wrong, good and bad. Historicism means that truth changes from time to time. What is true for one time is not necessarily true for another time. Positivism means that truth changes from place to place. The only law that exists is civil law, but it is changeable. The world state is composed of identical sub-units all formed on the same principle of infinitely variable “rights.” No overriding reason or natural law exists whereby anyone can judge the validity of one law, culture, or historical period over another. All are equally meaningless in terms of submitting to agreed principles that are universal.

IV

Since these many diverse wills in fact and in practice, however, come into conflict with one another with no common criterion of resolution, conflicts must be settled by power.⁵ The state or civil society, preferably on a world basis, is a construct designed to control and modify ideas and organizations so that “peace,” meaning no violence, is possible. This power brooks no opposition. The power of the state stems from the combined wills of the citizens protecting their own self-legislated “rights” to do whatever they want. The worst evil is death. Staying alive at any cost is the highest natural good. The threat of death stifles all ideas. The purpose of the state is to protect the “rights” it chooses to secure.

Two versions of this same voluntarist position, one non-theistic and one theistic, can be formulated and are prevalent. In the non-theistic version, since no order is found in nature, we cannot go to nature to find out what we or other things are. The only meaning that they can have is the meaning we impose on them. We do not name what is there. We name what we want to be there. Names no longer contain or hint at the richness of the things named.

5. See Anthony Esolen, “Speak Truth to Power?” *The Catholic Thing*, December 29, 2016, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2016/12/29/speak-truth-to-power/>.

This understanding of a reality with no order will include knowing ourselves as lacking any intrinsic order. If there is no creator God, then there can be no order to be found in the things that are not gods. What we know as “reason” is an instrument by which we can devise means to carry out what we want. We have a “right” to be whatever we want to be. The purpose of government is to provide us our “rights,” which are dependent on our wills. Government imposes its will by using superior force to settle whatever conflicting “right” seems most inconvenient. The conclusion follows that power is the only means available to prevent chaos. This is the one concession to “reason” in this understanding of politics. Nothing better reveals the logic of the voluntarist system.

In the theistic version of voluntarism, Allah, the god of Islam, is, like Hobbes’s Leviathan, considered to be a sovereign of pure will. He can will today the opposite of what he willed yesterday without worrying about contradiction. There is no reason why one thing follows from another. If we say that Allah cannot make evil to be good, we insult him by limiting his powers. Allah directly causes everything. There are no proper secondary causes whereby creatures, including ourselves, actually do something. Allah can make what is wrong to be what is right. No natural cause exists in things. Allah’s changeable will is the cause of every action, human and otherwise. Submission to this will is the purpose of religion and its worship. This submission is what history is about.

V

The second view of reality finds order in things. Reason corresponds to the way things are. If there is order, likewise, this order must be intelligible.⁶ The human mind knows first sensible things because man is a unity of mind and spirit. He was designed to know things that are not himself. The human mind can know *all that is*.

6. See James V. Schall, *The Order of Things* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007).

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There is an order in God, in man, and in natural things. The purpose of man in the universe is first to know it, then to use it for his proper purposes. In this way he comes to know himself.

The world is more “world,” as it were, because man is in it. Neither man nor cosmos can explain itself as to why it exists in the first place. Both come *ex nihilo*. We know that things do not cause themselves to be. We each know that we are not the causes either of what-it-is-to-be-human or why I as a particular being exist as I am. The process by which we are born into the world is given to us, but, once we do exist in this world, we make ourselves, either good or bad, what we are. The project of what we shall be is given to us in our very existence as human beings.

We need an explanation for why there is something rather than nothing. From nothing, nothing happens. The changes that we witness or cause in the world are modifications, improvements, or aberrations in what already exists. We can make things worse or better. We do not cause existence. We find it already there.

The central problem that we need to face is again: “What is the cause of existence?” “Why is there something rather than nothing?” “Why is this thing not that thing?” The principal power of our own intellects is the capacity to say, with Plato, that this thing is not that thing. Each thing is what it is. We can know things that are not ourselves. We name them. Indeed, the only way we can know ourselves is by knowing something that is not ourselves.

We exist as ourselves, not someone else. We are only what we are. No one wants to be, nor can he be, someone else. At first sight, this not being someone else would seem to isolate us and cut us off from all else *that is*. But this is not the case, for we also have minds and senses. Our minds are capable of knowing *all that is*. In knowing, we become what is not ourselves. If we know something, we do not change it, but we do change ourselves. We can relate to others because we can know them. Indeed, since we are social and political beings, we find our fullness in our relation to others also, including our relation to the ultimate cause of being.

But man is more than just another being in nature. He is indeed in nature and has his own nature. No human person was created in the beginning to be merely man with a natural happiness proportionate to his given level of being. From the beginning, he was, like each human person who ever lives on this planet, to participate in the inner life of the Godhead. How to accomplish this end had to be explained or revealed to him. This “informing” him is what revelation is about. We come to understand that we exist as individual persons with real fathers and mothers, not as an abstract species. We are created for a transcendent end beyond our nature. Understanding this background, we can explain why it is that we never find full satisfaction even in the good and best of things in this world, including political things. To explain ourselves to ourselves, then, we need more than ourselves.

This explanation of what we are and are intended to be was in fact given to us. It was not forced upon us. It was properly speaking given to us after the manner of a grace or a gift, as something we are free to accept or reject. But we must do one or the other. Were this option not the case, we would not be free. And the key reason why we are introduced into the inner life of God, of what the Trinitarian Godhead is, is that we may receive and participate in the love that God is. Love, including love in the Godhead, cannot be coerced and still be what it is. There are consequences, to be sure, when we reject anyone’s honorable and ordered love for us. The main consequence is that we will not, by our own choice, know what was to be given to us.

Let me conclude this chapter briefly. One view of the world is based on a world that allows us freedom to do whatever we choose. Nothing greater to which we are ordered can be found. In the end, our freedom means that we are, by our own choices, utterly isolated from all else that is. The second view of reality is that the world really exists. It reveals an intrinsic order, as do we in our physical and intelligent nature. All that is not ourselves is offered to us to be known and used in a proper order.

Our being includes an end, a purpose. This end points to our

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abidingness within the inner life of the Godhead. Both views of reality claim to be related to freedom. The first to whatever it is that we want, the second to *whatever is*. A drama is found in the universe. In its essence, that drama is about which view of the universe the finite rational and willing being decides to take in his understanding of the real truth of things.

THE ULTIMATE PARTICIPATION

On the “Other, Truly Better World”

We can do noble acts without ruling earth and sea; for even with moderate advantages one can act virtuously.

—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179a4–5

Our preaching, our proclamation, really is one-sided, in that it is largely directed toward the creation of a better world, while hardly anyone talks any more about *the other, truly better world*.

—Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, 179

This chapter originated as a lecture given at the Institute of the Incarnate Word (IVE), Chillum, Md., March 11, 2011.

I translate the epigraph from Aquinas (p. 54) as follows: “Although our body is not able to enjoy God by knowing and loving Him, nonetheless, through the works that we do through the body, we can come to a perfect enjoyment of God. Hence also from the enjoyment of the soul, a certain beatitude redounds to the body, namely ‘vigor of healthiness and incorruptibility,’ as Augustine said. . . . Therefore because the body in some manner participates in the beatific vision, it can love God by the love of charity.”

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Corpus nostrum, quamvis Deo frui non possit cognoscendo et amando ipsum, tamen per opera quae per corpus agimus ad perfectam Dei fruitionem possumus venire. Unde et ex fruitionem animae redundat quaedam beatitudo ad corpus, scilicet “sanitatis et incorruptionis vigor,” ut Augustinus dicit. . . . Et ideo quia corpus aliquo modo est particeps beatitudinis, potest dilectione caritatis amari.

—Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, 25, 5, ad 2

I

The ancient Romans sometimes considered Christians to be atheists because they would not worship the gods of the city. Some also considered Christians to be cannibals because of a peculiar interpretation of the substance of the Eucharist. Like Socrates, Christians distinguished between worshipping God and worshipping the gods of the city. One could thus be a civic atheist but still a worshipper of the true God.

The Muslims tell us that “There is no God but Allah.” But they then proceed to claim that this Allah cannot become man and that no Trinitarian life can be found within the Godhead. The whole world should be prostrate in its worship of this undifferentiated, monistic Allah. He vaguely might be the one God of the Hebrews. But this explanation makes any distinctive Christianity impossible. Indeed, the voluntarism that is often used to explain Allah makes the world itself impossible; or better, with the denial of the principle of non-contradiction, the world at the same time is both possible and impossible. We love God so much that we deny Him the pleasure of doing or creating anything with its own capacities.

The history of the world, in a way, is an unending search for the proper way to worship the gods. The infamous wars of religion are often over this very issue. We can debate whether a world with wars that took religion seriously is really inferior to a world founded on the principle of no wars and no gods. The fact is that human beings cannot seem to figure out by themselves the proper way to worship God, any more than they can figure out how to stop all wars. Why is this failure significant? Why should it be surprising?

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One obvious reason for no common worship might be that, since no God exists, the issue is irrelevant. Any way to honor a non-existing god is quite all right and quite irrelevant. But when we examine the reasons that are given why God does not exist, we often find them lacking in persuasiveness or logic. The world without God claims for itself a capacity to explain everything that God might be needed to explain. What it does not seem to be able to explain, in spite of many and continuing efforts, is why we want to know what we are and what is our origin.

If no God exists, then we really are in command. What could be our rivals? The animals? Some other intelligent race in space? This position, that we alone are in command, is what one major strand of modern thought is really about. It seeks the elimination of God in order to elevate man in His place. If it cannot eliminate Him by argument, it tries to do so by power. The essence of Christianity, however, is that the elevation of man by God is infinitely superior to anything that man might come up with for himself. We would understand this even in reason if we allowed ourselves to examine the differing positions clearly. The god we make for or of ourselves requires that we lower our sights from the real purpose of our creation and being as found in the revelational tradition.

Should we abandon “the God explanation,” we are left with only “this world,” to use a classic phrase. The word “world” has various meanings both in reason and in revelation. “Cosmos” means the ordered structure of the world as it is open to reason and investigation. It is opposed to chaos or lack of order. In scripture, the world is good as it comes forth from God’s hand. But in principle the world need not exist. God is not part of this world. We can have God. We can have God plus the world. We cannot have the world minus God. Yet, “world” can also stand for all that which is opposed to God. Thus, “worldliness” can mean either a lack of spiritual depth or a healthy appreciation for what exists, for *what is*.

Christianity stands in a paradoxical relation to the world. On the one hand, it says that here we have “no lasting city.” We live in a “vale

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of tears.” We still see wars and rumors of war, poverty, envy, rebellion, injustices, and crimes all about us. On the other hand, Christianity sees all things as coming from the work of the Creator, who saw that they were good. In some sense, we can say that things lead us to God, but they also can lead us away from God. All things that are not God contain a combination of nothingness and existence caused by God, as Josef Pieper once put it.¹ Finite things cannot totally explain themselves but, at the same time, they are something rather than nothing.

What I propose to do in this chapter is to relate the being of man to his participation in the inner life of the Godhead, for which, in the beginning, he was created. Modern thought has largely sought to rid itself of any idea that what-it-is-to-be-man has any meaning, especially any meaning that includes a measure or norm that does not come directly from himself. He is only allowed to give himself his own meaning. He is not allowed to exist from another source.

Modern thought is largely the reconstruction of this mysterious creature, formerly called man, in terms that presume nothing from any historical or transcendent order that would oblige him to anything but himself. Freedom then comes to mean, not the capacity to choose what is objectively right and noble, but the power to do whatever we want or choose. Since no human nature or natural law can be admitted to exist in things, we are “free.” Our freedom depends on getting rid of God or any inherent meaning in things. The classic idea of being free to choose what is good and worthy is thus overturned if we affirm that nothing is good or noble in creation.

II

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted a passage from Aristotle, who reminded us that we do not have to be politicians or emperors, rulers of land and sea, to do fine acts of virtue. Even those of moderate and humble means could, in their own world and time, do what was

1. See *Josef Pieper—an Anthology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1989), 91–106.

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humanly dignified and noble. I take this passage to be significant in the light of Christian revelation, which was addressed not only to the chosen Jews and the elite Greek minds but ultimately to the ordinary folks of whatever nation or gender or age. But in this form of universal purpose, Christianity had to be a revelation, not something we figured for ourselves. “Go ye forth and teach all nations” (Mt 28:19) did not mean that everyone would immediately grasp all the subtleties of faith. But it did mean that its basic intent and purpose could be understood and practiced by anyone in the nations. It is what Chesterton called the “democratic” side of revelation.²

Benedict, in the quotation at the beginning of the chapter, remarks that few talk of the “best” world as Christians understand it. The subject and location of the “best city” or the “best regime” no doubt is at the heart of political philosophy. We have, however, become oriented to “this world.” Our sermons and catechetics are often directed to this-worldly oriented programs. We talk of “social justice” as if we can find an unailing arrangement to provide all our worldly needs.³ We hear few sermons and discourses on the last things. The reason for this, I think, is a vast apostasy from the faith that now seeks to accomplish in an inner-worldly manner what the faith promised from its own transcendent resources. Modern ideology is itself charged with silent Christian goals.

The third quotation is from Aquinas. Calling to mind the themes addressed in chapter 1 on population and human destiny, it deals with the participation of the body in the life of supernatural charity. This reflection of Aquinas applies directly to the previous two quotations, namely, that we do not have to be rulers of land and sea to lead fine lives and that we seldom are asked to reflect on the “other, truly better world.” We are reluctant to affirm the resurrection of the body, because its fact implies faith in the revelation that is handed

2. G. K. Chesterton, “The Ethics of Elfland,” chapter 4 of *Orthodoxy*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1986), 249–68.

3. See Michael Novak and Paul Adams, *Social Justice Isn't What You Think It Is* (New York: Encounter Books, 2015).

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down to us in the Church. Yet, what this revelation tells us is what we would want if we could have it.

In his essay on “History,” in *Memory and Identity*, John Paul II wrote about the relation of political cities or regimes to our individual or personal destiny.

Human life makes sense and the history of nations also makes sense. Admittedly, it is people and not nations that have to face God’s judgment, but in the judgment pronounced on individuals, nations too are in some way judged. Can there be such a thing as an eschatology of the nations? Nations have an exclusively historical meaning whereas man’s vocation is eschatological. Yet man’s vocation leaves its mark on the history of nations.⁴

Here we touch on the Augustinian notion of the rise and fall of empires. The City of God was not of this world. The Empire, that is the political institution, was not eternal, though it was “immortal” in the sense that it went on and on within time as long as there were men coming into and going out of existence who followed its institutional order.

John Paul II affirmed that nations are not “saved.” Only individual persons are saved. Yet human persons are saved or lost within the nations. The configuration of regimes is not simply indifferent to how we live. Aristotle already understood this. The Platonic principle still holds. Regimes are reflections of the souls of the citizens who compose them. Christianity, while it is concerned with the history of nations, is concerned primarily with the salvation of souls to life everlasting. If we understand this end, the nations will look very different if we think that they are themselves the highest ends.

III

Lucy is bent over looking down at the ground. Charlie Brown is watching her with a quizzical look on his face. Lucy says, “Look at those stupid bugs. . . .” Still bent over examining them, with Charlie

4. John Paul II, *Memory and Identity* (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 76.

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looking on, she continues “They don’t have the slightest idea as to what is going on in this world!” Suddenly, Charlie looks up brightly to ask, “What is going on in this world?” Lucy finally looks directly at him. “I don’t have the slightest idea!” she replies.⁵

But that is our question, isn’t it? What is going on in this world? I have entitled this chapter “The Ultimate Participation.” Aquinas said that the human body in some way “participates” in beatitude. The human being as a whole, body and soul, as it were, participates in that ultimate good that energizes all reality. But this “participation” is meaningful only if we can participate willingly, because we recognize the grandeur of what we take part in. Aquinas, of course, places the essence of the Beatific Vision in our intellect’s ability to know God directly, face-to-face, with the assistance of grace. God, in other words, seeks to give us of Himself after the manner of what is possible to us, but only if we would have it.

What is going on in the world? Do we have the “slightest” idea? Let me see if I can answer this query about what is going on in the world. I sometimes think that we never get around to wondering about it. I will approach the question through political philosophy as it is spelled out in the Platonic tradition by Leo Strauss, namely “What is the best regime?” The best practical regime is what we should be about in this world. However our final destiny is not in this world; so, while what we do here is legitimate and good, it itself is not our final end, though it is an intermediate end by which or through which we reach our final end as reflected in what we do during our time here.

The question “What is the best regime?” arises because of the deaths of Socrates and Christ. Both Socrates and Christ were executed by order of a civil power in the best existing regimes of their time. Socrates was killed in the Athenian democracy, Christ under Roman law at the instigation of Jewish opponents. Both were innocent. Both chose to suffer evil rather than to commit it. In so doing,

5. Charles M. Schulz, *Peanuts Treasury* (New York: Fall River Press, 2005).

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they established the principle that a standard exists whereby we can judge political regimes: the standard of an objectively true good, not simply one made up by positive law.

The death of Socrates caused a profound turmoil in the soul of a young man by the name of Plato, who knew Socrates. Plato subsequently devoted his life to the question: “Is there a regime in which Socrates would not be killed?” The death of Christ included this point along with other implications. At His trial, Christ talked to Pilate, the Roman governor in charge of the trial. Pilate asked Him if He did not know that he (Pilate) had the power of life and death over Him. Christ, knowing that he had this power, replied that he would have no power at all were it not given to him by His Father (Jn 19). Christ is executed. He is buried and He rises again. He is not Socrates, though the death of Socrates upholds the standard of rightness. Christ says that He has a kingdom that is not of this world.⁶

The Christian who most pondered the Platonic question about the location of the best city was Augustine. Augustine, in examining the regimes of the nations, was quite sure that none of them would ever amount to much more than a gang of robbers, more or less attuned to keeping civil peace. Augustine did not think that the “best regime” would ever be an actual political regime in this world. But he did not despair of its existence. Plato’s “city in speech” did refer to the Kingdom of God in the transcendent order. Augustine could maintain this positive optimism because he knew of the resurrection of the body, something not available to Plato and Aristotle except as a wish or prayer. They had to settle for the “immortality of the soul.”

The question was now posed. The City of God is what the world is all about. It is related to this world but not of it. That is, all members who ultimately participate in the City of God are first in this world, where they live their lives “among the nations.” The life of the na-

6. See James V. Schall, *At the Limits of Political Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 123–44; Schall, *Roman Catholic Political Philosophy* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004).

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tions is the context of their lives, their mortal lives, their three score years and ten, if they are fortunate. They leave their mark on this world both by firmly holding that this world is not their ultimate end and by leading lives worthy of the love and kindness they have for others. Their lives also include their sins and aberrations, of which they may repent and for which they are now also capable of being forgiven, thanks to the incarnation, life, and death of Christ, whose very being is both God and man. Christ therefore is the bridge between this present world and the City of God.

IV

How then is the “ultimate participation” to be conceived? What is the “truly better world?” To answer these questions, we need to keep both reason and revelation in mind as two non-contradictory sources in effect directed to each other. On the one side, the world really exists in time and space. It is not an idea or an illusion. On the other, we have been informed about our being, about *what is*, both by reason and by revelation. In addition to what we know by our natural powers, revelation tells us certain things that we need to know about our ultimate destiny. What it tells us needs to be thought about in terms of what we know or can figure out by ourselves.

Aquinas said that philosophical knowledge of God, while true and useful, is not really adequate to give us a clear picture of what God is like.⁷ For this understanding we need an explanation that is addressed to us from God Himself. This revelation is what happened in the Incarnation with the drama of the life and death of Christ. These events are not myths or hopes, but events in time and space. While presupposing the whole of the Old Testament, they began with the Annunciation and the birth of Christ in the reign of Caesar Augustus. Catholic thought in particular has been a constant effort to maintain the reality of the world in order that the events that oc-

7. See James V. Schall, *What Is God Like?* (Collegeville, Minn.: Glazier/Liturgical, 1992).

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curred in it are not understood to be figments of our imagination.⁸ This is ultimately what a realistic philosophy is about.

“What is going on in this world?” Basically, what is going on in this world is the carrying out to its completion of God’s initial plan of creation. The universe or the cosmos is itself to be understood primarily as a context or scene in which this plan is in fact happening. Following the old philosophical adage that the first thing in intention is the last thing in execution, let me state that what God intended in the beginning was not a vast cosmos just floating out there someplace. The cosmos is, as it were, subsequent to the initial intention, which was to associate other free and intelligent beings (angels and men) with His inner life.

The first thing that needs to be appreciated is that the inner or Trinitarian life of God is complete and blessed in itself. It needs nothing other than itself. It is already composed of otherness, or other Persons in the Father, Son, and Spirit. Aristotle’s concern that God is lonely and therefore “needed” the world to have something to do or someone to love has no foundation in fact. God does not change because He created. He does not become happier or more complete if, in addition to Himself, a world of other beings besides Himself comes to be.

Moreover, only one God exists. Contrary to the Muslim claim, the Trinity is not composed of three gods. The inner life of the Godhead is composed of power and beauty, love and order. It is the end, that which is all good. The first intention of God was to create other intelligent and rational beings, beings who are real, finite, but not gods. These beings from the beginning will be offered something more than their own nature’s natural fulfillment. They will be elevated in such a way that they will be able to participate in the inner life of God, if they so choose. Man, without ceasing to be man, is thus naturally supernatural, not natural. In the beginning, he is

8. See Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth*, 3 vols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 2007).

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offered something open to but more than his own nature requires or is capable of.

The cosmos, in the order of intention, follows from this initial purpose. But in the order of execution, the creation of the cosmos comes first. The cosmos bears signs that it is ordered to the existence within it of the rational being. There are certain constants and events in cosmic history that, had they not happened in the way they did, no human life would be possible. This anthropic principle suggests that even in its vast structure, the cosmos bears signs of purpose, of something beyond itself.⁹ Plato said that within the world we also need something to understand it, praise it.

In the fullness of time, man does appear. His creation and first appearance are made intelligible through the accounts of the Garden and the Fall. It seems that God cannot simply give man the participation in His inner life apart from man's own will to accept it. In essence, the drama of Adam and Eve is about this plan of God to give us His inner life if we will accept it. Adam and Eve, as the account goes, choose not to accept the initial way that God had offered to them to participate in this inner life of God for which they had been created. This test is what the Fall was about, and we are still affected by it. We die. We find it difficult to be virtuous. We have a constant struggle with nature, including our own.

VI

Thus, it seems, the initial plan of God ran into the roadblock of man's freedom, or perhaps we should say the bad use of man's necessary freedom. What "constrains" God, as it were, is the fact that

9. See Robert Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010); Brendan Purcell, *From Big Bang to Big Mystery: Human Origins in the Light of Creation and Evolution* (Dublin, Ireland: Veritas, 2011); Mariano Artigas, *The Mind of the Universe: Understanding Science and Religion* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2000); G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image, 1955); David Warren, "Anthropic-ism Revisited," *The Catholic Thing*, August 19, 2016, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2016/08/19/anthropic-ism-revisited/>.

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His initial intention to create beings other than Himself to participate in His inner life, logically, because of the nature of love itself, depended on the rational beings' free acceptance of God's offer to them. God did not want automata to praise and worship Him. Only free beings can offer true praise and worship. This point is so basic that we must clearly see that the limit put on God comes from the fact that He does create real finite beings that are knowing and free. Other kinds or levels of being that are not capable of directly knowing God are also good. They seem to be envisioned in the context of the rational creature (Gn 1:28).

The actual creation of free beings, of course, entailed the possibility of their choosing their own ways over God's ways. Implicit in God's love of His creation was the power to counteract human sin by a further divine initiative that we call mercy. Its consequence we call the redemption, which was made possible by the Incarnation of the Son of God Himself into our world.¹⁰ Redemption meant that, in spite of human sin, it was possible for God, still respecting man's freedom, to offer a way to restore what was lost in Adam.

This new salvific way would not be a "coercion" or a punishment. It would be an example shown in a sacrifice of an innocent man who suffered rather than did evil. This understanding is what the Cross was about. It provided, in effect, a way to enter the best city, the City of God. But it depended on freedom and repentance. Christ did exist. He was the Son of God. This was the truth of His being. He did atone for all our sins. What was left was our accepting this *via crucis*, this counter-path to our initial rejection of participating in the inner life of God.

One more thing, perhaps, needs to be made clear. The outcome of the Crucifixion was the Resurrection. Looked at philosophically, this result seems impossible or, at least, improbable, however logical it appears to be. We are not complete human beings without our one being, without complete body and soul. Going back to the orig-

10. See Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation* (n.p.: FIG-Books, 2013).

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inal intention in creation, this incarnate person is what God obviously had intended to exist. Had the drama of the Garden been otherwise, as was possible, Adam and Eve and their offspring would not have suffered death. Death was not intended by God, but it resulted from man's act (Gn 3:4). The devil tried to deny this consequence in his conversation with Eve, but he was wrong—he was, as we say, a liar.

Once death came into the world, it was both a punishment and a blessing. Modern science and philosophy have often been little more than efforts to make us immortal in this world. We have numerous methods to keep us alive, to resuscitate us, all of which have implicitly behind them a nostalgia for the resurrection. But, as Benedict says in *Spe Salvi*, unending death in this world is the worst conceivable solution to the problem of the best regime, to a “truly better world.” In fact, it is an extension of hell, of the ultimate loneliness that results from choosing ourselves over participation with others of our kind in the inner life of the Godhead for which we were created.

Thus, we conclude with Lucy's question, “What is going on in this world?” We can say that what is going on is the drama of human persons who seek in the particular actions of their lives their ultimate happiness. This end is found only through participation in the inner life of the Trinity, the original purpose for which the world was created in the first place. We have never met any human person whose final end in the intention of God was other than this Trinitarian life. We may, to be sure, have met those who have refused or will refuse to accept this purpose.

God's only choice, in any case of a free refusal to accept it, is to let men have their free choice to live according to an end that is other than the one for which they were created. For the rest who accept the invitation, what they are given is what is beyond their expectations and deserts. The ultimate humility is the realization that we are given not only ourselves, what we are, but more than we can

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expect. This is nothing less than freely to accept eternal life. This is participation in the inner life of the Trinitarian God, Father, Son, and Spirit, ages upon ages, and world without end.

“We can do noble acts without ruling earth and sea.”

We hardly hear any talk anymore of “the other, truly better world.”

“Our bodies in some way participate in beatitude and thus can love with the delight of charity.”

WHY DO MINDS EXIST IN THE UNIVERSE?

Before all things else wisdom was created; and prudent understanding, from eternity. To whom has wisdom's root been revealed? Who knows her subtleties? There is but one, wise and truly awe-inspiring, seated upon his throne: It is the Lord; he created her, has seen her and taken note of her. He has poured her forth on all his works, upon every living thing according to his bounty; he has lavished her upon his friends.

—**Sirach 1:4–8**

Reality is immensely complex, and the truth about it must also be immensely complex. Only by long and painstaking work can mankind assimilate some, not much, but at least some of it.

—**J. M. Bochenski, *Philosophy—an Introduction*, 41**

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Is there an infinite body, as the majority of the ancient philosophers thought, or is this an impossibility? The decision of this question, either way, is not unimportant, but rather all-important, to our search for the truth. It is this problem which has practically always been the source of the differences of those who have written about nature as a whole. So it has been and so it must be; since the least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousandfold.

—Aristotle, *De Caelo*, 271b6–10

I

A human race, one by one, has appeared on the planet Earth, the third from the Sun, itself a bright but relatively small star, one of billions in the cosmos. While all such dates are controversial and subject to radical revision, the age of the universe is now given as around 13.7 billion years. What we know as time and space began then, 13.7 billion years ago, immediately. Our Sun is calculated at 4.5 billion years. That is, it took about seven billion years for it to show up. Our race, whose appearance on this planet is relatively recent, has itself manifested a human form that has gradually increased in numbers, within the last centuries or so, to billions of individual persons.

Each of these existing persons lives a certain amount of time, usually at most up to eighty or ninety years, if they are strong, as Psalm 90 has it. Most human beings, of course, die younger. Not a few never make it out of the wombs of their mothers. With today's biogenetic, in vitro techniques, many others may never make it into the womb of a living mother. Many fertilized ova are frozen or discarded. Since 1980 alone, through deliberate human agency, over 1,300,000,000 abortions have been carried out world-wide. What we call "natural" deaths go on at their usual rate, but wide-spread state-assisted or imposed euthanasia is becoming the norm.

Estimates have it that perhaps ninety to one hundred billion human beings, give or take considerable room for error, have lived on this planet since mankind first appeared some widely disputed

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number of years ago. Some seven billion human beings are currently alive, with some being born and some dying daily. A general population decline is developing in the so-called advanced countries. This decline appears to be the result, at least in part, of a loss of human purpose.

The billions who have preceded us over the ages have left a record of their presence among us. We have accounts of their deeds and thoughts in writings, in ruins of their cities and buildings, and in memories of their faces and voices—statues, photos, and, more recently, recordings or film. Because of this human presence, scientists have taken to referring to the post-Ice Age in which we now live as the Anthropocene Age. This phrase means that the men who have been present in this era have reconfigured much of the earth in their image. Some even experiment with reconfiguring the human corpus itself.

The human race itself, however, does not exist all at once, or in one place, or in one being. It exists, as an intelligible whole, only in the mind. But in its actuality, the whole human race includes the living and the dead, plus whoever might live in the future if they actually come into existence. Each existing person seems both to belong to nature and yet to possess something that transcends the concrete cycles of nature. Ever since Genesis, it has been assumed that the primary purpose of the earth is not simply to continue its existence untouched down the ages, but to provide for the existence and flourishing of man if he sets himself to using it. The purpose of the human race in time cannot simply be to leave the earth and its riches untouched, as if man has no real purpose for being where and what he is. The wealth and abundance of the earth already existing on it even before men arrived makes human life both to exist and to flourish. In some basic sense, man obviously comes from the same ultimate source that everything else does.

The question that I want to address in this chapter is perhaps unusual, if not rash. But it is, I think, a legitimate one. Why, in this

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universe, do we find, in addition to things inanimate and things living by instinct, also a strain of living beings with minds? Can it be merely an accident? To be sure, we do not have disembodied “minds” in this world. We are not “ghosts in a machine”—to use Gilbert Ryle’s description of Descartes’ understanding of man. Our minds and bodies are not absolutely independent of each other, as we sometimes think in reading Plato, Descartes, or certain spiritual writers. We are “living beings with *logos*,” as Aristotle put it. We are a race of beings, each member of which can think. That fact sets us apart, but does not deny that we also have bodies that are involved in the very process of our thinking.

We have a power both of understanding things and of being able to act on them through our understanding for our own purposes. Our very bodies, as Leon Kass graphically pointed out in *The Hungry Soul*, seem, in comparison to animals, to be “modified” in such a way that they facilitate our thinking.¹ This intricate intertwining of mind and body is why our eyes are where they are; why we stand erect, and why we hear. Josef Pieper made the same point in this way: “The whole living human body acts as an infinitely differentiated and sensitive receptacle of this direct contact with reality and thus forms one whole organ of possible experience.”² We take it for granted, if we wonder about it at all, that the purpose of a person with mind is first to know what is not himself. And what is it that a mind knows when it is actively knowing?

The first thing that a mind knows, or, better, the first thing that a human person knows through his mind, is not the mind itself or the knowing person. Unlike God or the angels, the minds that we have, evidently, become active, as it were, become luminous to themselves, only when they know something besides themselves. We ourselves are not the first objects of our knowing powers. Even

1. Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfection of Our Nature* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

2. Josef Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 104.

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to know what we look like, we need mirrors, that is, some artifact besides ourselves.

We do not in fact know ourselves except reflexively when we know something else besides ourselves. Then, we realize that it is “I” who knows that tree or that person out there beyond myself. When we say “I know,” we always have to name something else that we know besides ourselves. Knowing does not happen unless a something is being known. Our “I” is not the object of our immediate knowledge. Yet, we are certain that it is “I” who knows what-is-not-myself when we know anything at all.

The great Delphic admonition—“Know thyself!”—was not a formula to bypass things other than ourselves. Rather it advised us to know ourselves by how we knew and dealt with others.³ We might say that the first time that we know anything at all besides ourselves becomes an indirect gift to us of ourselves from outside of ourselves. We do not know that we know until we know something not ourselves. To “know ourselves,” we must spend much time, even our lifetime, being made alert and intellectually active by what is not ourselves. The wondrous existence of myriads of things that are not ourselves make it possible that the one unique being that is myself knows that *I exist*.

Yves Simon once wisely put it this way: The only way that we can be ourselves is that we are not anything else but ourselves.⁴ To be myself, it is imperative that I am not someone or something else. But if there were not something else, I could not know that I exist. Knowledge of someone or something else as such has the marvelous ability to leave the person or thing known as it is. What is not ourselves lives in us by an intentional, not real, existence. What I know of another exists in me in the form of intentional knowledge, whereas the actual person I know in reality exists in being and what

3. See E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977), 62–80.

4. Yves Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 91–94, 152–53.

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caused it. Otherwise, every time we knew something, we would consume or destroy it by our knowing. It is true also that my capacity to know is a given with the being I am.

We must add one more thing. In the case of other human beings, if we know simply their exteriors, their height, weight, and other particulars about their statures, we do not really know them. In order for us to know someone else as he really is, he has to want us to know him. He has to invite us to know him. He has to tell us about himself. We can, to be sure, guess or intuit some inner characteristics or qualities of others, both good and bad. But we are beings who have to reveal ourselves if we want to be known by someone else and vice versa. This fact brings up at many levels the whole realm of friendship among human beings, indeed within the divine being also.⁵ The fact is, as Aristotle said, that we can know only a few people, probably very few, in one life time, if we mean “know” them well (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1171a10–15). And this restriction is a good thing, not an evil, though it is a loss.

Walker Percy wondered, early in *Lost in the Cosmos*: “Why it is that we cannot look in the eyes of someone else for more than ten seconds without turning away?”⁶ This question is relevant to the biblical refrain that we want to see God “face-to-face.” We want to see one another “face-to-face.” We have to suspect from these striking experiences that the ultimate object of our knowing is not exclusively another human being, even though we are told to love our neighbor as ourselves. We usually have no trouble accepting this admonition as the worthiest human happiness. But we are also aware, by the same logic, of the millions or billions of other, likewise human beings, whom we will never meet or know in this life. We have to conclude that this “meeting and loving absolutely everyone else” is not necessary for our purposes here in this life. Chesterton put it

5. See John von Heyking, *The Form of Politics: Aristotle and Plato on Friendship* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2016); James V. Schall, *The Mind That Is Catholic: Philosophical and Political Essays* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 104–50.

6. Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York: Farrar, 1983).

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well when he remarked, “The duty towards humanity may often take the form of some choice which is personal or even pleasurable. . . . But we have to love our neighbour because he is there—a much more alarming reason for a much more serious operation. He is the sample of humanity which is actually given us.”⁷

II

What is the point of these reflections? It is this: Something in the universe exists besides just a multiplicity of other things that do not know themselves. In addition to non-rational beings, the existence of a knowing being in the universe changes everything. In addition to things, we have thoughts about things. Why? Lucy and Charlie Brown are in a strategic huddle before Charlie sends Lucy in to bat in a crucial game. “Lucy, you’re the next batter,” he tells her. “Here’s what I want you to do.” Lucy listens with growing perplexity. Charlie explains: “The situation calls for a bunt. Now the other team knows that we know the situation. . . . But we know that they know that we know.”

As Lucy becomes ever more dazed, Charlie goes on calmly: “But it just may be that they know that they know we know . . . so . . .” In the final scene, Lucy turns on a confused Charlie. She tells him: “Start over.”⁸ The mind not only seeks to cover all possibilities, as Charlie was trying to do, but it seeks to know what other minds are thinking in the light of what we are thinking. Thus, we not only have the existence of things that are knowable, we also have a world of thought about these things, even a world of thought about thought, which can itself be thought about.

And learning anything really well usually involves a series of “start overs.” On the basis of experience, the intellect “intuits” what

7. G. K. Chesterton, “On Certain Modern Writers and the Institution of the Family,” chapter 3, *In Defense of Sanity: The Best Essays of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. Dale Ahlquist, Joseph Pearce, and Aidan Mackey (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), par. 6.

8. Charles Schulz, *You’re the Greatest, Charlie Brown* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1964).

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the thing it observes is. It seeks to know ever more clearly what it is by naming it, by examining what it does—*agere sequitur esse*, as the Scholastics put it, the action of a thing follows the *what is* of a thing. We don't expect ducks to bark. If they in fact do bark or say "good morning," we look for a cause beyond the duck.

As Bochenski remarks, even if reality is immensely complicated, we seek to know what we can of it. Presumably, reality remains mostly what it is even when we know it. And if something does, perchance, become something else, we want to know the process, the reasons, whereby it changed. We do not find rocks or even toads out there trying to figure out what they are. They are what they are. But human beings are not content with the fact that they just are. And "Upon every living thing according to His bounty" something has been "lavished." It is called wisdom. It suggests that everything, if it exists, possesses an act of being that cannot be explained by anything that is not existence itself.

Aristotle was most perceptive when he told us that we cannot really escape the question of the infinite body, at least if we want to know the truth. Aristotle presumed that we did want to know the truth. The "least deviation from the truth" multiplies errors "a thousandfold." I suspect this multiplication is true. It shows that much is at stake when we think about things, both when we think correctly of them and when we think erroneously about them.

The Book of Sirach tells us that the Lord has poured forth his wisdom on all His works and "upon every living thing according to his bounty." These are curious words. In everything, we find not only the thing itself but also a "wisdom," as if to say that it is not *what it is* simply by itself. No finite thing caused itself to be *what it is* or to be at all. This relation to wisdom would imply what poets have long seen, namely, that we see even in a flower or a bird something that connects us with all things. It is not surprising then that the intellect is best defined as that power or capacity that we have whereby we know all things. Our minds are *capax omnium*.

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We might surmise, then, that since some fundamental relationship exists between things and knowing things, we can legitimately wonder why. Is there something incomplete about a thing if it is not also known? One of the further curiosities about knowing is that, in principle, to know a thing does not change the thing known. It is true that on the basis of knowledge, a knower can become a maker. He can change something about a thing. He can take wood and make a chair. He can even make a plastic chair, that is, a chair from a substance which itself depends on the mind and the making capacities of the person who possesses it. But in itself, my knowledge of a thing or a person does not change a thing, without some transference or application of knowledge by will and hand.

Aristotle was perceptive when he defined man as that being in the universe with both a mind and a hand. Man's soul, his formal cause, makes his very body an apt instrument through which he can know what is not himself. His memory and hands make it possible for what is inside of him, his acquired knowledge, to have an effect outside of himself. It enables him to become present, to make himself manifest in the world. Indeed, he can make something "that works." It may take many centuries to perfect an idea—say a self-moving vehicle to get rapidly from place to place. But the record of the improvement is written in every automobile that we now drive.

Am I implying that the reason we have minds is so that we can drive cars? Tens of thousands are killed every year in automobile accidents throughout the world. Our actions seem always to admit of either good or bad. While we do not trust madmen or apes with our Toyotas, we evidently soon will trust our robots to drive them. An article in the San Francisco paper recently had an account of a robot-driven car getting into an accident. Robots are just a sophisticated form of human intelligence and human hand working together, as are machines that land us on the planets of our solar system or those that enable us almost instantaneously to communicate with one another across the world.

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Man exists as an individual personal being that has a transcendent end for himself, but who exists in a world in which some sort of primordial fall seems to cloud his personal and corporate history. The fact that he is not primarily a spirit, even though he has a soul, means that man changes gradually, often slowly. He is responsible for himself, both for what he does that is good and what he does that is evil. All utopian schemes that try to eliminate evil by some sort of impersonal means—economic, political, or psychological—usually end up making him worse. They do not want to understand that present in the world is also a revelation that can redeem each man but only on its own terms.

The primary purpose of this revelation is not “world improvement” either now or down the ages. Rather it is the salvation of each soul in whatever civil or economic condition a man finds himself. This is not an individualism but a personalism that sees the relation to others and the given status of mankind to be the context of a man’s salvation. The greatest enemy to this view, as Benedict XVI pointed out in *Spe Salvi*, is an inner-worldly utopianism, usually called modernism.⁹ It promises every transcendent Christian principle as attainable in this world by human means.

III

Here, however, I am not asking primarily about man’s transcendent destiny, though its proper understanding, I think, is what makes possible our sense of why we find minds in the universe. Rather, I am asking a question about the existence of a finite mind itself. In a way, I am asking: “Would God bother to create a world in which no rational being existed?” I know that for God “all things are possible” and that all being is good. So logically I have to say that a world without man in it would be an incomplete world. God would not create an incomplete world. If He did, it would indicate

9. See James V. Schall, *The Modern Age* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011).

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that God, even while knowing in what it consisted, did not complete what He began. That would, in my opinion, be a defect, a contradiction, in the Godhead. I do not mean that God had to make everything He could conceive. Rather I mean that if He actually began a thing that He did not complete, it would show a defect in His intelligence as He already knew the end He rejected. No purpose would exist in half-completed things. This view does imply, no doubt, that at the end, the world will be complete in the sense God intended from the beginning.

Such issues may sound silly to scientists or anyone else who might worry about such esoteric things. But I think that the scientists are key in the answer to this question, provided that they do not, in principle, exclude the primary issue. The cosmos itself is the place in which each rational being, to participate in his personal and corporate destiny, decides freely, by the way he lives, his relation to his transcendent origin. The physical universe exists as the arena in which to reveal our purposes—high, evil, or banal. It makes possible the conditions for real action.¹⁰

That being said, however, we can still inquire: “Is anything lacking within the world itself, even if we do know what man’s final end may be from a source outside of the world?” I emphasize again that nothing in a thing known, when it is known, is changed. The change takes place in the knower. That change in the knower, as such, is invisible to all but the knower and those to whom he reveals it. Logically, then, the last and most important “change” in the universe is when the human knower finally understands why the world exists and what his place in it is. Contrary to much modern ideology, of sundry origins, the world does not exist in order that, somehow down through the ages, a perfect inner-worldly city will exist in this world. We have to conduct our lives with the realization that sin and evil among us, including in our leaders, will continue as long as we are in this world.

10. See James V. Schall, *Reasonable Pleasures* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), 167–89.

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Following St. Augustine, I would argue that this perfect inner-worldly city simply will not happen. To pretend or predict that it will happen makes it difficult or impossible to concentrate on what can be done. The principal reason to deny any down-the-ages perfect city as the purpose of the world is this: it makes all earlier generations, who did not live in the later best regime, unable to reach the purpose of their existence. I take this fact to be the historic lesson of political philosophy. The trans-worldly purpose of the cosmos has to be achievable even by the imperfect, sinful men who inhabit it. Each of them lives at most three score years and ten in imperfect polities. It is during their given period that they attain or reject the transcendent purpose for which they are created.

So what is left? What happens over time with human intelligence? It learns more about what is not itself. Some of this knowledge it also forgets or loses. In learning and forgetting about what is not itself, it is also more aware of itself as a being who seeks to know and who can know all of *what is*. Each person learns that this thing is not that thing. He distinguishes. In so doing, he finds similarities and dissimilarities. Nothing he encounters caused itself to be or to be the kind of thing it is. He says: "This is not that." "That is this kind of a thing." "That does not exist." He says such things because what he sees and knows are the same or not the same. He is hardly prepared for the wide variety of things that he knows. But he rejoices in their abundance.

At a certain point, man realizes that the cosmos out there is not watching him. It has no capacity to do what he can do. Nothing in the cosmos, except man himself, knows *all there is* as "the cosmos." He not only knows the separate things in the cosmos, but, in some sense, their unity as an order, not a chaos. But though the cosmos is not watching man, he is watching it. Why? To know *what it is*. If the different things in the universe can be known, they are made to be known. They are a communication of knowledge of what does not know itself to a knower who knows it. Thus, the universe is not com-

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plete unless we find something within it, not just outside of it, that can know it, can know the *what is* that is in it.

Aquinas said in his *Treatise on Law* that the Eternal Law is the order of all things as they exist in the mind of God. But the natural law is the order of those same divinely known things as it is resident in the things themselves. These latter are the things we know when we know. And Aquinas does tell us in the *Summa contra Gentiles* (II, 46), that “the perfection of the universe does require that there be some intellectual creatures” in it. It is only when the universe is known that it can be freely praised and returned to its Beginning. This is why Plato says, in his *Laws*, that we should, in response, spend our lives “singing, sacrificing, and dancing.”¹¹

Aquinas further tells us that we cannot love a thing unless we first know it. Without knowing a thing, including a human being, in the only way he can be known, we cannot really love it. Love follows upon knowledge as well as leading to it.

Socrates tells us in the *Phaedrus* that “to be unaware of the difference between a dream-image and the reality of what is just and unjust, good and bad, must truly be grounds for reproach, even if the crowd praises it with one voice” (277e). That we be not unaware of this difference between just and unjust, good and bad, is why minds are found in the universe.

And in the *Symposium*, Diotima says to Socrates: “What is the real purpose of love, can you say?” He tells her that, if he could answer, he would be not her student but her teacher. So she answers him: “Well, I’ll tell you. It’s giving birth in beauty whether of body or of soul” (206b). That we be not unaware that we are known and loved, both by God and by one another, is why minds exist in the universe.

But, not to forget that we are but men passing through a vale of tears to our transcendent end, let me recall, in conclusion, a passage

11. See James V. Schall, *On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2001).

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in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. It is April 26, 1776. Boswell complains that he has "dined at a splendid table without hearing one sentence of conversation worthy of being remembered." Johnson responds: "Sir, there is seldom any such conversation; for when there is, people differ in opinion, and get into bad humour, or some of the company who are not capable of such conversation, are left out, and feel themselves uneasy."¹²

We will, I think, find no more sober and concrete reminder of the way most of us are and live than in this classic Johnsonian exchange. Philosophy exists in conversation when we are aware of what we actually know and say. *Caritas* (charity) is directed to *logos* (reason), to the love of truth. Reason in its turn is directed to the reality *that is*. Mind, the power to know, also exists in the universe as a power in rational beings given to them as fundamental to what they are. Ordinary things do go on. Revelation exists that even those who differ radically in opinion or are not much capable of high conversation may not be ultimately left out of that final conversation and the love that is given to us if we choose to accept it. Thus, revelation is itself directed to philosophy, to the distinction of good and bad, of *what is* and what is not. That such things might be known, might be pondered, accepted or rejected is the final reason that we find minds in this universe.

12. *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (London: Oxford, 1931), II, 38.

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The Unavoidable Wonderment

[Socrates] “Could anything great really come to pass in a short time? And isn’t the time from childhood to old age short when compared to the whole of time?” [Glaucón] “It is a mere nothing.” [Socrates] “Well, do you think that an immortal being should be seriously concerned with that short period rather than with the whole of time?” [Glaucón] “I suppose not, but what exactly do you mean by this?” [Socrates] “Haven’t you realized that our soul is immortal and never destroyed?” [Glaucón] looked at me with wonder and said: “No, by god, I haven’t.”

—Plato, *Republic*, 608c–d

They had journeyed thus far by the west-ways, for they had much to speak of with Elrond and with Gandalf, and here they lingered still in converse with their friends. Often, long after the hobbits were wrapped in sleep, they would sit together under the stars, recalling the ages that were gone and all their joys and labours in the world, or holding council, concerning the

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days to come. If any wanderer had chanced to pass, little would he have seen or heard, and it would have seemed to him only that he saw grey figures, carved in stone, memorials of forgotten things now lost in unpeopled lands. For they did not move or speak with mouth, looking from mind to mind; and only their shining eyes stirred and kindled as their thoughts went to and fro.

—J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 288

I

In the 1907 novel *The Travels of Lao Ts'an* of Liu T'ieh-yün, a rather manipulated marriage with a pleasing young lady is arranged for the hero, Lao Ts'an. He is in part tricked into agreeing to the contract but, in fact, things work out. In considering how he should understand his situation, he finds a pair of red scrolls on a table in the "Shrine of the Man in the Moon." The characters on the scroll read: "May all lovers under the sky achieve the married state; these things are fixed in heaven: do not miss your mate."¹ These lines, in fact, are repeated as the last lines of the novel. They are designed to explain to us how we are to look at the events of our individual lives, however they happen, justly or not.

If we spell out the ideas implicit in these memorable lines, we see lovers and marriage to be naturally related to each other as their end. When they happen, they are "fixed;" they are meant to be. One does not rebel against what is meant to be. Yet, it is implied that one can "miss" his mate. How is this possible if his mate is "fixed?" We have already here in these Chinese characters the problems of love, freedom, fidelity, providence, and fault. Can the marriage of lovers be free and still be "fixed" in heaven? Is it possible for us to "reject" or "miss" what ought to be? And if we do miss it, is not that consequence also "fixed?" But if it is not possible to miss our "mate," what is the meaning of our freedom?

1. *The Travels of Lao Ts'an*, translated by Jarold Shadick (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 194.

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The web of our existence, it is implied, is greater than we know. Yet it is precisely we who are contained within it. The cosmos has no independent power of consciousness to look at us. When we look at this same cosmos, we seek to articulate what we see, as if it made a difference to it that someone, not itself, understands it.

Philosophers tell us that, if we are to be human, certain abiding questions must be asked and, insofar as possible, answered. A human being does not exist just to exist as a kind of inert stone. Nor does he exist just to keep himself alive, like the man in one of Plato's dialogues who spent his whole life just keeping himself in training so that he would not be sick. In the end, he did nothing but stay alive, a rather useless life, as Plato saw it. Man exists to know what existence itself, *what is*, means. And within the sphere of existence, he wants to know what his own individual, personal existence means. Even if it does not "mean" anything, he wants to know that too.

When Socrates famously said in the *Apology* that "an unexamined life is not worth living," he did not intend simply to unsettle us. Nor did he approve the person who asks questions just to be asking questions. The question-asking habit for its own sake logically is just another form of skepticism or sophism, something that Socrates hated more than anything else. The first of these questions, as we have seen in earlier chapters, is: "Why is there something, rather than nothing?" The second follows: "Why is this thing not that thing?" These questions, in turn, are based on the existence questions: "Do I exist?" "Does the cosmos exist?" "Does God exist?" Can we even ask, "Does nothing 'exist'?" without being incoherent?

II

In act I, scene 4 of *King Lear*, Kent says: "This is nothing, Fool." The Fool replies: "Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer; you give me nothing for it. Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?" Lear replies: "Why, no, boy. Nothing can be made out of nothing."

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This affirmation that “nothing can be made out of nothing” is what philosophers call a “first principle.” It is a proposition the truth of which is contained within the very understanding of its terms, in this case, the understanding of “nothing.” If the proposition that “nothing can come from nothing” is true, then nothing can come from nothing. If it is false to say that “nothing can come from nothing,” then it must be true that something must come from something, not nothing, that is, nothing can come from nothing. And logically, if I exist, my being must be related to *what always is*. Any break between the two existences, that is, existence itself and my existence, would mean that I do not exist, which I know to be false.

Why am I bringing up these rather abstruse considerations here? In an old *Peanuts* cartoon series, Linus, dragging his blanket behind him, is walking down a road with Charlie Brown. He explains to Charlie: “I don’t like to face problems head on.” Charlie, puzzled, stops to look at him, as Linus goes on: “I think the best way to solve problems is to avoid them.” He takes his stand: “This is a distinct philosophy of mine.” In the final scene, Charlie has one of those “how-is-this-possible” looks on his face as Linus explains his philosophical reasoning: “No problem is so big or so complicated that it can’t be run away from.”²

The notion of “running away” from our problems is an amusing one, for we carry our problems with us wherever we go. Yet, spending all our time on ourselves is precisely what our lives ought not to be about. In late medieval spirituality, one school of thought so worried about elements of self-love in our desire for beatitude and God that it almost ended in denying our very existence. Something of this sort of concern is found in classic Buddhism, I think, in the melding of the self into the all.

Any notion of love that ends up by absorbing the self into the other, be it the beloved, the world, or the divine, rids itself of the problem of the permanent status of a particular individual being by

2. Reproduced in Robert Short, *The Parables of Peanuts* (New York: Harper, 1968), 53.

eliminating the one who has the problem, namely the distinct person, the I who exists. Aristotle, in a famous passage, remarked, in his common sense way, that we would not want to have all the goods and riches of the world if it involved ourselves becoming someone else other than who we are. So again, “What am I?” “Why do I exist?”

III

The *Washington Post* (April 7, 2015) reviewed a Chinese novel by Mo Yan called *Frog*, a novel considered for a Nobel prize. What interests me here is its plot. A jilted Chinese midwife in revenge becomes a state agent. She systematically pursues pregnant women who already have one child. In her career, she is responsible for 2,800 abortions.

Later, she reconsiders what she has been doing. She marries a sculptor. She arranges to fashion tiny figurines of each aborted child. She places them in her home. If we recall that there have been some 400,000,000 babies aborted in China, and over 1,300,000,000 in the world since 1980, we have to reconsider the question, “Why do I exist?” In one sense, each of us exists because we were not aborted.

But this answer is not sufficient, as the symbolism of the figurines testifies. What was aborted was not just “nothing.” It was an already-begun human life that was open to the same destiny as any other human life. We have to assume that each aborted baby was originally created for the same purpose as anyone else who managed to last three score years and ten after birth in this world. The difference is not that that the aborted baby was not a human being. The difference is simply that it was not allowed to develop as babies are intended to develop. There are also babies who die from natural causes, who are not executed by some state midwife. Even of these babies, we still ask the question, “Why do I exist?” We ask this in the context of every other individual member of the human race who has ever been conceived and lived as human.

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How do we go about thinking of this series of questions? Or better, how do we go about answering them? We can approach the question, “Why do I exist?” from two angles. To be sure, we exist as the peculiar individuals we are because of the relationship of our mother and father to each other. But this answer—and it is a correct answer—just pushes the issue back to our parents and on back to the existence of anyone at all in this world. We ask, what am I able to figure out about “Why I exist?” from my reason? We can also take into consideration what is found in revelation. Having looked at both, we can perhaps make some tentative answers to the question as asked.

IV

When we consider these things, we first notice that we cannot begin to think unless something else, besides ourselves, provokes or incites us to think at all. We see a lake or a slice of bread or a cat. We want to know, “What is it?” We notice that neither the lake, nor the bread, nor the cat asks itself what it is or why it exists. It is we who ask these questions about them.

We also notice that I ask the question, “What is a cat?” In doing so, I distinguish myself from the cat. And just because I know what a cat is and what this particular cat looks and sounds like, I do not change the cat. What changes is me. I find that I am more than myself when I know and think about what is not myself, whatever it is. I realize that knowing the cat or lake or bread does not limit me. It expands me. I can know all sorts of things. Indeed, as Aristotle said, I have a power or capacity to know everything *that is*.

When I have accumulated many things known, I begin to wonder how they all fit together, how one is different from or like another. I also want to know why I am related to them. I do notice that some of them I need just to keep myself alive. I need water and bread. I have to figure out ways to make or obtain them. For this purpose, I usually have to depend on the help of others. Others, we find, know many of

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the things we do not know. We can cooperate both in our knowing and in our making and doing.

So I want to know whether there is any order in these things. “How do they all fit together, if they do?” Strangely, with everything I encounter, it seems that we are all in the same boat. Their existence, though it is actual, is not explained by themselves either. They come to be and cease from being, often in a regular pattern. I notice that cats cause cats; human beings cause human beings. But neither seems to be able to bring itself into existence. Each thing apparently comes from what is already there. Our being is bound to the being of others.

Thus, the answer to the question, “Why do I exist?” seems to involve the question, “Why does anyone or anything exist?” And, because of the power of knowledge in some, but not all, things, we want to know, “Whether what is not capable of knowing is itself related to the purpose of the beings with the power of knowing as part of their very nature?” Does the existence of the world also imply, as we saw in the previous chapter, that, for it to be complete, it ought itself to be known? This relationship would mean that the knowers need to have time sufficient to understand other things as part of their existence.

But if something is known, does not this imply a knower that is capable of knowing *all that is*? This conclusion would mean that somehow the world includes a communication of mind to mind, as well as an existence out of nothingness. Now, if I ask the question, “Why do I exist?” I suspect that the answer is, “So that I might know what is not myself.” With this answer, I become aware of myself as knowing what is not myself. So I begin naturally to wonder, “What is it all about?” Is there a common origin or cause of all things that need not exist, including myself?

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V

Now let me approach our question—“Why do I exist?”—from another angle, from the angle of revelation. Let me say this about revelation. Some people will hold it is myth, or madness, or of no “scientific” importance, so we need not pay attention to any of its answers. But what if what it tells us about the world, God, and ourselves has intelligibility about it? What if it makes some sense? We cannot just walk away from this information as if it is of no concern to us. It provokes us.

Moreover, if we do find intelligibility is what is called revelation, does it help us to think better about ordinary things? If it does, this fact suggests that some connection between our intelligence and the intelligence that the universe and revelation imply makes some sense. Socrates tells us that when he was a young man, he was concerned with the order of the world. He found no satisfying answers. But one day he was in a bookstore in Athens. He happened onto a book by Anaxagoras in which it said that the cause of the world was not earth, air, fire, or water but “mind” (*Phaedo*, 95a–e). He was never the same after that, and neither are we.

The assumption of revelation is that “mind,” the source of all intelligence existing in the universe, is capable of communicating with any mind, including the human mind, if it so wishes. This view, that God freely but not necessarily communicated with other rational beings in the universe, implies that the world is not itself necessary. It did not need to exist, nor did anything in it, including ourselves. Thus, the question “Why do I exist?” would have to consider the fact, if it is a fact, that the purpose of the universe with actual rational beings in it has a source.

Since no finite being caused its own existence, yet still it exists, something else must have caused it to be, and that something else must have had a reason. Thus each person must consider what revelation describes as the purpose of the existence of each human per-

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son. This purpose could involve both an inner-worldly purpose and a transcendent purpose that would explain the destiny or salvation of each individual person.

To make my point, let me cite two passages from Scripture, one from Acts and the other from the Gospel of John. In Acts, Peter is asked by the rulers to explain by what authority he is preaching and curing. He responds:

Leaders of the people, Elders! If we must answer today for a good deed done to a cripple and explain how he was restored to health, then you and all the people of Israel must realize that it was done in the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazorean whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead. In the power of that name this man stands before you perfectly sound. This Jesus is “the stone rejected by you the builders has become the cornerstone.” There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name in the whole world given to men by which we are to be saved (Acts 2:8–12).

What does this passage tell us? There is a “salvation” for each person from sin and death, given in a definite way through Christ.

The second passage from John reads: “The Father loves the Son and has given everything over to him. Whoever believes in the Son has life eternal. Whoever disobeys the Son, will not see life, but must endure the wrath of God” (3:35–36). What are we told here? We are told that each of us is to be given “eternal life.” But it is given only on the condition that we understand whence this gift comes. It also depends on our free acceptance of it. But whether we choose to accept God’s invitation or to refuse it, we remain everlasting, some to glory, some not.

If we lack the elements of freedom and repentance, not even God can help us. Could our destiny have been achieved in some other way? Doubtfully, but not so perfectly. We are, each of us, to participate in the inner life of the Trinity through the Son’s redemption. This death on the Cross was necessary because of our sins. The consequence of sin, death, had to be overcome.

Even before Christian revelation, Plato did concern himself with

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some of these issues. In the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* he maintained that our crimes and sins need to be both punished and forgiven. Both Plato and Scripture understood the punishment part. But Plato did not know how the forgiveness part worked itself out. He did understand that the one against whom we sin needs to forgive us. He did understand that the fault needs to be acknowledged as an objective disorder that we put into the world, that what is right needs to be reaffirmed.

VI

Let me now conclude by answering our original question, that is, “Why do I exist?” I exist to participate in “eternal life,” that is, the inner life of God. I can do this because of what I initially am: a free and rational being. But also it is possible because I have been offered a life beyond my natural capacities. God did not originally intend that we die (Wis 1:13–15). He created us in a world where our existence depended on others.

The effects of our virtues and vices are not isolated in a box, affecting no one but ourselves. They have their consequences, even if those consequences are not intended. Going back to the Chinese midwife who, in repentance, carves the figurines of her aborted children, each human life, from conception to natural death, has as the end offered to it “eternal life.” If we reject this gift, we are left to ourselves. We know that what we missed we did so because of our own choice. This “missing” we call hell, and it has other consequences.

The “eternal life” that each is promised is to be worked out in the actual history of the time and place in which each person lives his finite life. This makes every human life, no matter what its circumstances, to be an eternal drama carried out in time and beyond it. No one can, in the end, be a friend of God if he does not choose to be so. This is the condition of friendship of all sorts, including that with God.

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Nothing can come from nothing. And ultimately we cannot, as Linus wanted to, run away from all big and complicated problems, especially the one that defines our final existence. Our destiny, our salvation, is not just “fixed.” Rather, its “fixing” depends on us also. Perhaps, with Glaucon, we are surprised to learn that our souls are “immortal.” Perhaps, with Christ, we are even more surprised about the resurrection of our bodies, that which finally makes us whole in “eternal life.”

But, as Gandalf and Elrond understood, we exist for conversation, for things past and things future. We exist to abide with the cause of our being—something rather than nothing. So if we ask, “Why do I exist?” we have two related answers. One tells us that we are to know *all that is*. The second explains that we are, if we choose it by the way we live and think, to be given “eternal life.”

Many answers are given to this question, “Why do I exist?” None but this one, the one that combines reason and revelation in a coherent whole, is so gladsome, so . . . what shall I say? . . . so coherent.

At the Shrine of the Man in the Moon, perfect love requires that we first be loved by what alone can bring us into the existence that we uniquely are. The drama of the world is not “fixed” until we “fix” it. We fix it by the way we respond to the truth that we can love only if we have first been loved, as John’s letter tells us. To make that response, in short, is why I exist.

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Then we're not legislating impossibilities or indulging in mere wishful thinking, since the law we established is in accord with nature. It is rather the way things are at present that seems to be against nature.

—Plato, *Republic*, 456c

To wish paradise on earth is stark naiveté. But it is surely better than not to wish any paradise at all. To aspire to paradise is man's grandeur; and how should I aspire to paradise except by beginning to realize paradise here below? The question is to know what paradise is. Paradise consists, as St. Augustine says, in the joy of the Truth. Contemplation is paradise on earth, a crucified paradise.

—Jacques Maritain, "Action and Contemplation,"
in *Scholasticism and Politics*, 182

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I

When we ask, “Why do I exist?” we know that others ask the same question. We exist among others. We cannot exist or do anything much without others. We are, as Aristotle said, social and political beings. In this universe, members of the human race are the “mortals.” That is, they are unique beings in the sense that they, each of them, will die. But all living, corporeal beings, not just men, die. What is the difference? The difference is that men know that they will die. Understanding what a human being is, then, includes this awareness of its finitude in this world. The “when” one dies is not certain, the “that,” is. Whether the fact of death might have been otherwise, whether a world lacking in death could exist, is an abiding topic of human speculation. Its possibility was already found in the Genesis account of the Fall.

But even though science sometimes claims that we can lengthen human life to hundreds of years, which is a grasping for inner-worldly immortality, it is difficult to see how such a lengthy life would be anything but agonizing. Death in this light of ongoing existence in this world seems a blessing. This realization of some wisdom in death is why the second form of immortality, that of the soul or spirit, came into play. Immortality may be intimated by a conscious experience of knowing unchangeable being and principle. But it is also brought in view because of the general awareness that the injustice of individual human lives is not always punished and virtue not always rewarded in this life, no matter how long it lasts. Our lives, in other words, have something to do, not with how long we live, but with how we live while we are in this world for whatever length, wherever or whenever human beings live.

What human beings are plays itself out against the background of the particular death of each person who comes to be in the universe. Any society, at any time, be it tribal or political, is filled with members who are being conceived and born, growing up, reaching maturity, then old age, and death. The membership of any lasting

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society is transitory in this sense. Though polities themselves also pass away in time, usually they last well beyond the life span of the given individuals who compose them. Members of any polity are here for a time; then they pass on. This mortal condition allows for both newness and tradition, for replacement and continuity.

Most people who have ever lived on this planet do not live out the famous three score and ten years said to be allotted to some of the more vigorous. But few of those who live so long are able actively to participate in what might be called the “ordinary” affairs of mankind, that is, the economic efforts to keep us alive and prosper, the efforts to identify what is good and what is evil, and the efforts to attend to things of nobility and beauty. The classical comments of Socrates in book one of the *Republic* and those of Cicero in his essay “On Old Age,” were designed to address the issue of the importance of age and wisdom to a human community from which the individual citizens would sooner or later depart.¹

Philosophy is said to be itself a “preparation” for death. Politics, however, are held to be what we do before death, that is, what we do during the period from our conception and birth through our education, public life, old age, and death. Politics concern the life of the mortal being while he is “mortal,” while he lives, flourishes, and declines. The connection between how we live and how we die is not arbitrary. The oft-repeated notion that “we die as we lived” is designed to stress this relationship. The notion of asking for “forgiveness” for aberrant personal acts implies an effort to reconnect how we did live to how we ought to have lived. One of the original purposes of having a political order in the first place was to establish a rule of law and justice whereby disorder could be punished and order restored. No political order in history has achieved more than limited success in this endeavor. This fact leaves the question of justice open to something beyond politics.

1. Plato, *Republic*, 328a–331d; Cicero, “On Old Age,” *Selected Works* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1971), 211–50.

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Man, though he belongs among the mortals, is not merely a “mortal.” He is also seen to have something about him that is “divine” or “immortal.” Politics has something to do with this “immortality.” The human dignity of each person is related to the fact that something about him exists that is more than political or finite. The word “immortality” itself has two related meanings. The polity was set up so that the passing words and deeds of men who lived in them would not be lost to the generations that followed them. This is why we have monuments, poems, and written words. To know what we are, we need to know what we have been and done. We need to know the record of great men and terrible tyrants, as well as the deeds and words of ordinary people.

Thus, we have an “inner-worldly” immortality that consists of our remembering those who have lived before us, who have shown by their lives and deeds what is great and what is heinous. Politics, consequently, are “founded” so that what we have done or what we ought to have done is not forgotten. Politics are constituted with “authority” to decide on what ways of action and word are to be followed and why. This “founding” is not arbitrary, but has many elements that can vary. There are often many good ways of doing many differing and worthy things.

Likewise, there are many ways to put into effect what is wrong or evil. The freedom that human beings possess is a freedom that follows on their intelligence, not a freedom that lacks any direction or order. Freedom means that we can do evil, but that we need not. Freedom does not make the difference between good and evil but recognizes it and seeks to act accordingly. Man is free to choose evil, but not without choosing it under the aspect of its being good. This is why the controversies of reason about what is true and good are unavoidable: one man may choose something that appears to him good, but that another man recognizes as evil. A free polity is one that is open to such discussions as fundamental to its public order.

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II

When we inquire about the “nature” of something, we want to know and understand *what it is*. This endeavor to know what something, besides ourselves, is assumes that something exists in the universe that is worth knowing. We ourselves are legitimate members of this same universe. We can tell the difference between what is real and what is imagined. Once we know something is real, we can imagine something that is not real. Not to be able to tell the difference between what is real and what is imagined is a sign of madness or derangement.

We also observe that not everything is exactly the same, though all things do have some things about them that are rightly common. Nothing is so different that we have no way of identifying it. If each thing is simply unique and diverse, nothing can be said about it. All efforts to speak about it become artificial constructs with no relation to what is being identified. It is not an accident that a polity is defined as a place where speech is to be grounded in a reality that can be verified as true. We can know what is “out there” and affirm its reality. The only way a polity can be held accountable for the acts of its leaders and citizens is if there is a standard in which all acts and words can be grounded.

Political entities are not direct products of nature like vegetation or animals. They are not “substances.” But they are “natural” once we have human beings who can act together to achieve something, in this case a common life. In this sense, politics are a reality but not a *substance*, not another “being” with a “life” independent of the citizens who compose it. Rather a polity describes rational beings insofar as they relate to one another to form an association in which many goods can best be achieved, particularly the development of a virtuous life of the citizenry. To say that man is “political” by nature means that he will invariably put this organization into existence once he comes to a point where he needs to act in common to achieve goods

that are worthwhile but impossible to achieve solely by himself.

In this sense, the polity is set up not as opposed to men's achieving what they can by themselves, but as completing what they can achieve in a more complete form in union with others. Man's life is finite and temporal insofar as he is mortal and political, and the polity is a late-arrival. Many things are necessary before it can fully develop, just as when it is finally organized, it is by its own nature open to something that is not properly itself. This is one reason why the academy, while a proper institution of any common good, is not simply another agency of rule. The academy is, or should be, a sphere in which not only politics but what is beyond politics can be freely and reasonably addressed. The good of any polity requires that it grant a space for what is not just political. Otherwise, it will not understand the limited sphere in which politics is to be itself.

By adding the word "political" to the word "philosophy," we do not intend to change the nature of either politics or of philosophy. We can say that "politics" is a legitimate object of philosophical inquiry. Likewise, we can say that the politician needs to know what intelligence and mind are about lest he misunderstand the nature and good of the citizens who are to be ruled and guided to the many ends to which they are open. The temptation to tyranny is, at its most dangerous, the subsumption of philosophy into a politics that allows no purpose but itself.

Politics are concerned with human action and interaction insofar as men are organized together by custom and law to attain a common good. Private goods, in contrast to public goods, are perfectly valid and are also elements of public goods. They should be protected and encouraged. The common good is not a sum of private goods. The "nature" of each human being is such that he needs a polity to be what he ought to be. That good is not just any "good" or "desirable" thing. The common good is what is good for what-it-is-to-be-a-human-being in all its variety and breadth, including the good of individuals and smaller groups of human beings.

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Neither politics nor philosophy means anything if there is no mind to think them. The fact of beings with minds existing in the universe is not the result of human agency. It is a given. Thinking is not caused by politics. Politics is the result of thinking.

All things that flow from this given-ness of human reality are themselves implicit in the original power to know. Among these powers that flow from reason is the use of the mind to relate human beings one to another in a coherent social unit in which beings with reason could participate because they could know. The origin of politics is not, as such, force. Force, though not intrinsically irrational in its use, always appears as the result of a failure to use reason. Legitimate force implies an effort to restore reason in the one using illegitimate force. Force is designed to protect oneself and others from its wrong use. To say that man is a “political being” means that he is a being capable of causing associations based on reason in order to achieve his further purposes. Many of the things most needed and worthy in life are achieved only with the ordered cooperation of others. This cooperation presumes intelligence and freedom. The limits of actions and freedom, what makes them what they are, are always found in the truth of the things we deal with.

In other words, *what it is to be man* is not itself subject to the function of politics. It is assumed by it. If man were not already a rational being, politics could not make him so. Any politics that rests solely on force cannot transform itself into reason. But a reasonable being can understand why force is sometimes needed in every political order. In order to know the whole of “things political,” we need to know not just the good or best regimes, but also the worst and those in between. The total comprehension of “things political” includes an understanding of the reasons for disordered regimes. Aristotle even explains, for our understanding, how to be a “good” tyrant, as if to say, that the complete knowledge of what is good includes what is not good.²

2. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1313a33–17b26.

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Philosophy seeks the knowledge of the whole. Its proper object is *all that is*. Aristotle tells us that politics is the highest of the practical sciences but not the highest science.³ The highest science is metaphysics, or ontology, which includes the causes of being. Its object is being as such, *what is*. If we deny the force or existence of metaphysics, if there is no objective order that limits our actions to what is right, we are free to construct our own world as if the truth of things did not exist, thus we automatically make politics into pseudo-metaphysics that claims to be able to account for all things by its own practical methods. Politics is the highest “practical” science, not the highest science as such. Practical knowledge presupposes an end that is given to it, one not constructed or made by man. Politics deals with the means to attain a given end already contained in *what man is*. When politics claims to define ends and not means, it has absorbed metaphysics into itself.

When it is said that Machiavelli is the founder of “modern” political philosophy, what is meant is that the “prudence” that guides particular human action to its highest good is replaced by the “art” whereby the politician artist directs the polity to an end defined by nothing but the ruler, whether he be prince or democrat. In this sense, modern politics is defined by the loss of a natural end that limits the politician to *what is*. This limitation is the charter of any possibility of a critique in the name of reason made of any existing regime.⁴ From Machiavelli’s premise, carried forward by Hobbes, the good state is not that one in conformity with human nature. Rather it is one that corresponds to what the prince or democrat wants. In other words, the politician is not limited by anything but his own will. Such a view, as Aquinas had pointed out, goes back to the principle of Roman law: “Whatever the prince wills, is the law.”⁵ This recurrent position in the history of political philosophy is the

3. Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1141a20–22.

4. See James V. Schall, *At the Limits of Political Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

5. Thomas Aquinas, “Treatise on Law,” *Summa theologiae*, I-II, 90, 1, obj. 3, ad 3.

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origin of a voluntarism that has no reference to being as a check on its scope of power.

III

Political philosophy begins, as we have seen, with the trials of Socrates and Christ, that is, with the presence before the laws and judges of an existing state of the philosopher or prophet, summoned for being what he claimed to be. Both Socrates and Christ obeyed the laws of the polity under which they were tried.⁶ Their trials were not “illegal” in any technical sense. The Athenian jury and the Roman governor did not violate any procedural laws in the course of either trial. But, as readers of accounts of these trials throughout subsequent history have recognized, there was obviously something wrong with both legal scenes. Was the problem in the laws themselves, which were generally considered the best laws of their time, or in the souls of those who executed authority?

Both Socrates and Christ died obeying the laws of the states in which they were executed. Paradoxically, the only way for them to leave the question open with regard to their innocence or guilt was to die willingly. Socrates lives, as he tells us in the *Crito*, according to the laws of Athens. He did not want to destroy its laws by refusing to obey them at his death. His death brings us back to the relation of mortality to immortality, as he tells us in his *Apology*.⁷ Socrates dies in peace obeying the laws, because he knows his death is itself a judgment of those who wrongly tried and executed him. Christ died before a Roman governor who was not sufficiently concerned with truth to find out what was happening before him.

Neither Socrates nor Christ wrote a book entitled “What Is Political Philosophy?”⁸ Yet, we know about them because accounts of

6. See James V. Schall, *The Politics of Heaven and Hell* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984), 21–38; Schall, *At the Limits of Political Philosophy*, 104–22.

7. Plato, *Crito*, 49a–54d; *Apology*, 38c–42a.

8. See Leo Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?” in *What Is Political Philosophy and Other*

their trials were written by Plato and Xenophon, by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Some there are, no doubt, who go away from these public trials and executions to conclude that both Socrates and Christ should have been sentenced as they were. They were guilty of upsetting the settled political order of the polities in which they lived. The authorities were merely looking for public peace. "It is better that one man die than the whole nation perishes" (Jn 11:50). Such a principle deftly bypasses the question of justice, which is what a city was set up to uphold. A polity has a "right" to defend itself against those who undermine the existing public order. The language of "rights" based on the will of the prince is consistent with itself but not with the truth. It is this concept of "rights" that mostly measures political entities today. Obedience to the laws means accepting whatever the ruler "wills."

Others, knowing of the same trials, are thus less happy with their results. They are aware of a possible conflict between philosophy and polity. When, as a young man, Plato witnessed the fate of his mentor and friend Socrates, he could not but ask himself: "Must it always happen this way?" "Will something like these trials eventually exist in and undermine every polity?" "Or, is there a place where philosophy and politics can exist in harmony?" It is in this sense that the origin of political philosophy arose from the soul of the young Plato. He asked the questions that demanded reasonable answers, not just solutions of power.

Plato clearly concluded that only in argument, only in speech, could the conflict be resolved. And Christ taught, in effect, that only in the transcendent order could the practical conflicts about deserved punishment and reward ever be resolved. All existing political orders would be less than perfect. Indeed, the implication was that the most dangerous political order was in fact the one that did

Essays (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959), 5–55; Charles N. R. McCoy, *The Structure of Political Thought* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963); Robert Sokolowski, "The Human Person and Political Life," in *Christian Faith and Human Understanding* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 179–98.

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claim to be perfect in this world. More philosophers and prophets have been killed by regimes claiming perfection in this world than by the pragmatists like Pilate, who was just trying to avoid problems. This conclusion meant, in practice, that all existing regimes would be more or less imperfect. This conclusion did not mean that some regimes were not better than others.

The description of regimes in terms of better or worse was one of the functions of Aristotle's *Politics*. He distinguished between good regimes that ruled according to law and bad regimes that ruled according to the end of the ruling man or body. What this classification meant, in effect, was that certain basic issues that every person had to cope with were, in principle, "beyond politics." But it also meant that existing regimes could be the context in which a repetition of the fate of Socrates and Christ was repeated in other times and in other forms. Most regimes, even the worst, have in fact attempted to avoid being in the position of making martyrs of its philosophers and religious leaders. When those leaders have been killed, it was usually on the same justification that Socrates and Christ were killed, namely, as threats to the state and its laws.

Modern democratic theory, in its own way, tried to avoid this confrontation by reducing to insignificance the import of metaphysics and revelation. But most modern democratic regimes came to base themselves on the principle that nothing was higher than the positive laws of the state. If something was "legal," it was therefore moral. Any disagreement would be considered a "private" matter. The classic problem of tyranny did not exempt democracies from its scope. Indeed, democratic tyrannies can prove to be even more dangerous than the classic ones described by either Plato or Hobbes. Whether a king, a dictator, a parliament, or a democracy be the body that enforces the principle that the positive laws of the state are the only laws, it will still be classified as a tyranny in the broader understanding of that term. It means that the will of the ruler is the law.

IV

What much modern democratic theory and Islam have in common is a form of philosophic voluntarism. In principle, both are rooted in the pseudo-metaphysics that stems from denying that there is such a thing as a human nature that is itself not subject to political or scientific manipulation. Put more broadly, we have systems of voluntarism, whether rooted in the will of the prince or the will of Allah, that deny the stable nature of any existing thing, particularly of any human thing. Man is infinitely malleable. He can be the opposite of what he is without inconsistency, or so it is claimed. There is no standard or reason that measures actions other than the standard of that authority that can will the opposite of what it willed before.

In the initial passage quoted from Plato, he remarks on the possibility that the *things that are* at present are contrary to nature. What is he saying here? He implies that nature can remain normative or ruling for human beings in a polity even if the actual polities that they create and live in are in fact contrary to the human nature that ought to be. This means that a criterion whereby to judge disordered regimes was the major reason Plato wanted everyone to have a “city in speech” that was capable of retaining an order of good even if it did not exist in the political reality in which one lived. If we do not have a city in speech or mind, we can judge the justice of the existing laws only according to the laws themselves. The figures of Socrates and Christ in political philosophy abidingly stand as judgments on existing regimes and warnings of what can or, indeed, is likely to happen in them. This situation is something that classical conservatism has long been aware of.

Plato noted that the best regime was not just “wishful thinking.” Indeed, existing regimes are more in the line of “wishful thinking” insofar as they deviate from the good and insist on calling themselves the best practical regimes, about which nothing better can

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be imagined. This is Machiavelli's regime that contains not what men ought to do but what they, in fact, do. In other words, it is a regime that refuses any criticism of its laws that is based on a higher law in which the sins and errors of actual regimes are required, as Plato argued they would be in the last book of the *Republic*. In this sense, Plato's "city in speech" is not a utopia, a wishful thinking designed to be embodied in this world, but a permanent criterion by which the dangers of utopia in this world are recognized and existing regimes are not exempt from standards they do not formulate or observe.

Theoretic voluntarism was invented or argued from both political and theological sources. It meant that reason did not direct will but was subject to it, in its service. No "objective" truth or reality existed to correct what is willed. In the West, the line from Scotus, Occam, Marsilius of Padua, to Hobbes resulted in a concept of the good of the state as dependent on the will of the Leviathan. Eventually, this Leviathan could take a monarchic, legislative, or democratic form. The Roman law principle, "Whatever the prince wills, is the law," as we saw, had already envisioned this principle. It exempts the prince from any reference to a transcendent criterion that would limit his rule. The absolute supremacy of the English parliament was based on the same notion. In Islam, voluntarism arose because of contradictions in the Qur'an that needed to be justified.

If Allah could command both *jihad* and peace, both violence and non-violence, it was necessary to explain why this view was at all justifiable. If God or the Leviathan were pure will, and if reality itself had within it no order or natural law, then all that men could do would be to submit to the will of the god or ruler. Submission to the law, whatever it was, became the only "virtue" required. Men did not have to ask; indeed they could not ask, whether the law of the state and the law of the god were in conflict with reason. Any grounds for asking such a question had been eliminated by the premises of voluntarism.

The well-being of men in politics depends, ultimately, on the thought on which their politics are built. But the thought behind politics is itself a result of thought about *what is*. It is not merely thought about politics alone. To understand politics, we always need to know more than politics. Aristotle noted in the last book of his *Politics* that what happens in a good regime is a passage from politics to leisure. The term “leisure” (*scholē*) did not mean relaxation or laziness. It meant the intense activity and curiosity about all things that comes when material needs are met.

Mere physical well-being produces a life, as Glaucon said in the second book of the *Republic*, fit only for “pigs.”⁹ He did not mean that physical well-being was bad, but that it was just the foundation, the presupposition for considering what human life really meant. The key question became: “What do we do when all else is done?” We seek in peace, free from ordinary needs, to know the truth of things.¹⁰ In this sense, the polity exists that sufficient virtue might be present to transcend immediate needs and disorders of soul to arrive at a free and true understanding of *what is*.

When we have a good regime, what is it we “do?” In other words, are politics sufficient for man? In a famous passage in the *Politics*, Aristotle brought up the question of the “wickedness” that is found in every existing regime as rooted in human beings.¹¹ Such “wickedness” seems endemic to human nature as it actually exists. It is Machiavelli’s justification for saying that politics do not deal with what men “ought” to do, but with what they *do* do.¹² But if this what-men-do-do becomes our criterion of rule, we necessarily end up justifying some evil in the name of what men *do* do, instead of striving to correct it on the basis of a justice we know of from the city in speech or reason.

9. Plato, *Republic*, 372d.

10. See Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009); James V. Schall, *On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2001).

11. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1263b20.

12. Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1999), chapter 15.

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Aristotle suggested that, if the reason for this “wickedness” was that men were hungry, they could be given property to supply their needs by themselves. If it was because of pleasure, they could be taught virtue. But if this “wickedness” was just because men wanted power to do what they wanted, there was no solution but philosophy.¹³ Why philosophy? Philosophy was the only discipline that could actually confront the adequacy of the reasons given for one’s supposed self-rule over all of nature. Augustine was later to treat of this issue under the notion of pride.

But there was one problem with this approach. It was a problem that every politician who was a good man but not a philosopher had to face. And a mistake here could be fatal for himself and his polity. This is the problem of the sophists, of the philosophers whose souls are corrupt or whose minds are themselves not ordered to any true good. This is, as it were, the Socratic political problem, the problem of Athens, the city of philosophy, the best existing city. It did not recognize the philosopher when he appeared before them. The citizens did not want to “examine their lives,” as Socrates had often tried to incite them to do.¹⁴

If present societies are “against nature,” as Plato suggested that they might well be, we will not likely find any society according to nature among the existing cities. This conclusion takes us back to the philosophers who are like the captain of the ship in book six of the *Republic*. The sailor/citizens thought him mad. They were not able to recognize him because their own souls were in disorder. Their state ships lurched randomly all over the range of evil and good.

Thus, in conclusion, we return to our original inquiry about “the nature of political philosophy.” We must recognize that political philosophy is a discipline of thought. It recognizes not just that some regimes are better than others (which we can say because we can know what is good), but also that some philosophical systems are

13. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1267a2–15.

14. Plato, *Apology*, 38a.

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truer than others. The politician knows how sophists, undisciplined or unwise academics, can undermine his polity. Philosophers know of Callicles, in the *Gorgias*, the handsome and intelligent politician who contemns any inquiry into any thought that might question his rule. He will not accept that mind can judge power. But the sophist will not admit that mind can judge mind either. The great battles of politics are first fought out in the minds of the dons and the thinkers seeking to explain *what is*.

In the end, political philosophy is a testimony that the final regime, the final happiness that we seek, is not a this-worldly political regime. The citizens and philosophers who recognize this truth are, nevertheless, all born into some actual polity, the kind of polity that did or could kill Socrates the philosopher or Christ the man-God. The premises that justify these killings are all based on a voluntarism that accepts the principle that whatever the prince or the democracy wills is the law. Yet, philosophy does not solve all its own problems, however open to reality it is. And this is the final theme that politics leaves with the philosopher who is concerned with *what is*.

Philosophy is open and true when its practitioners rise out of a good polity, in leisure. Must they also be open to a revelation that addresses not only the “wickedness” of human nature, but also the realization that some answers to philosophic questions come to it from outside philosophy, though not in contradiction to it? Both the political order and the philosophical order, when they are lived out by good politicians and good philosophers, reach a point of incompleteness.

The nature of political philosophy, as well as that of philosophy, is to remain open to the whole, to what cannot be supplied by itself. This is why: in their depths both politics and philosophy are oriented beyond themselves. Politics is simultaneously an end, a highest practical good, and a means to something beyond itself, to philosophy and truth. Political philosophy, at its best, recognizes

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its crucial contribution to the fulfilment of human nature by understanding what politics are. It leaves man free to understand himself as oriented beyond death to something greater than, but not contradictory to, politics. Augustine may have been more perceptive than we know to have called it “the City of God.”

ART, FAITH, AND CREATIVITY

On the “Artistic” Origins of Political Disorder in Modernity

The death of God is the liberation of man from God. . . . Man can now be loyal to the earth, as Zarathustra admonished him to be. The heart of the earth is gold; there is no hell. The death of God is the liberation of man from guilt. . . . The death of God is the discovery of man’s creativity.

—Werner Dannhauser, “Friedrich Nietzsche,”
in *History of Political Philosophy*, 842

Christian theology is a theology of divine generosity, of that superabundance of divine being which is manifested in God Himself, as only revelation can tell us, in the plurality of Persons, and which is manifested, as we could have discovered by reason alone, by the fact that God is Love, and that He is the Creator. . . . It is not for Himself, St. Thomas says, it is for us that

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God made everything to His glory. When contemplation super-abounds in efficacious love and in action, it corresponds within us to that divine super-abundance communicative of its own good.

—Jacques Maritain, “Action and Contemplation,”
in *Scholasticism and Politics*, 174–75

I

To keep alive the thought of those who have preceded us is one of the functions of intellect, with its support in memory. Or perhaps we could better say that thought is always alive—its record is found in the libraries of the world—but only if someone thinks it. Thought is always the activity of a person. It never, even in the case of the angels or God, stands simply by itself outside of someone knowing. “Thought thinking itself” is in fact God, to recall Aristotle. We are to think ever more deeply on those insights and truths that make us aware of *what is* in the first place. It may have been something in our experience or something handed down to us. All thought can be understood, but not all thought corresponds to reality just because it is thought by someone. Errors continue to be errors no matter when or where they are thought. Truths are truths even if few ever acknowledge or judge them to be true.

The drama of thought includes the outcome of the struggle between truth and error. All being is “true”—*Omne ens est verum*. But not all thought about being is true, though any thought will always have some truth in it. We cannot just think error. Pure error, just as nothing, is in fact unintelligible except as a negation of being. Since our actions flow from our thought, we cannot be indifferent to the truth or falsity of what we think. What we can do, however, is to concoct a world that justifies what we want to do even if what we want to do does not conform to what we ought to do. The world of thought thus includes the world that seeks to make error plausible in order that we might act as we would.

The measure of thought is *what is*. It is also able to conceive and

put into effect things that would not exist unless human beings made them. This latter is the world of art and craft, of the things made by man. Both politics and art are activities of man's practical intellect, that is, the use of his mind to formulate what is to be done or made. The similarity and difference between art and politics need to be understood. Behind this consideration lies the issue of the relation of the practical intellect to the theoretical intellect. The theoretic intellect is concerned with simply knowing the truth of things. The practical intellect looks to doing and making. It is the same intellect looking at two different aspects of being. Aristotle discussed, in the sixth book of his *Ethics*, the two virtues of the practical intellect under the headings of prudence and art or craft—*recta ratio agibilium* and *recta ratio factabilium*.

These two rather innocent sounding phrases require much consideration. Indeed, on their proper understanding depends the whole issue of right order of soul and its possibility. Aristotle contrasts these practical virtues—prudence, justice, courage, and temperance—with the three theoretical virtues of wisdom, first principles, and science. These latter virtues are concerned only with how things are, with *what is*. We are content with that knowledge as its own good. Indeed, we are delighted simply to know that things are and what they are. Such activities are indeed proper to us as human and rational beings, though they also touch on the transcendent.

Our one mind, as Aristotle taught us, is indeed but one mind. However, it operates differently when it considers things that cannot be “otherwise” and those that can be otherwise. (Already here we note that if, in our theory, all things can be “otherwise,” we have implicitly excluded the idea that something can be true. Here we are already at the beginnings of that voluntarism, whether divine or human, that allows nothing to be *what it is*.) In the first case, when we consider things that cannot be otherwise, truth is found when the mind conforms to reality, to *what is*. In the second case, regarding things that can be otherwise, truth is the conformity of the mind

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with what we ought to do in moral things, or with what we intended to produce in the case of art and craft.

The mind, as such, does nothing, as Aristotle also tells us. Its primary purpose is simply to know, not to do or to make. Doing (human action) or making (a chair) follows knowing, not vice versa. Something beyond mind is required to go out of mind, or, better, to put mind in things. This “beyond mind” factor is why we are beings with both minds and hands. It is the hand that reflects the mind and enables it to move outside of itself. The fact that we do “go out” of the mind is itself the primary proof that we have both will and mind in their relation to each other. But both will and mind need hands.

II

Among the things that can be otherwise are the material things that are already in existence. We can make a chair or a computer, but only so long as, at the same time, wood remains wood and metal remains metal. We have the power and the tool, the hand, to fashion the things of the material universe to conform to our needs and desires. In this sense, some correspondence exists between mind and matter, as if they belong together. The very structure of our being, which includes mind and body, indicates the truth of this relationship.

But among the things that can be otherwise are not only material things, but also our lives. We are the rational beings whose perfection or goal seems to include properly ruling ourselves. We can do a good or bad job of it, for which we are praised or blamed. We are the one being in the universe whose perfection is not simply given by nature or instinct. Man requires some of his own input for him to be what he is intended to be. Whether a person reaches what he is intended to be constitutes the primary drama of the universe. In this sense, we can say that the world is filled with people who are not what they ought to be. This failure does not make them nothing,

nor does it mean that they cannot change to become what they ought to be.

Thus, Aristotle says that the truth of the practical intellect in matters of human action is the conformity of our act with what the good man would do in the same circumstances. Though seeking the advice of others is often a good idea, Aristotle did not mean that whenever we want to do something we should look up this proverbial “good man” in the neighborhood or online. He meant that in every act we are about to put into reality, we can find within its various possibilities what is correct or worthy to do. We can also choose not to do what seems best or right. We do not “create” this rightness, but we find its possibility in being.

These ethical considerations are important because they contrast with the truth that is found in things that proceed from art or craft. The goodness of a chair concerns first whether it is in fact a chair or not that we set out to make and secondly with whether the particular kind of chair that we make corresponds to what we intended to make. The “truth” of art or craft is thus the conformity of the thing made to what is intended to be made. In this sense, art is free to make all sorts of things that do not exist in existential reality but which can be imagined or pictured as feasible to some purpose. It follows from this capacity that a good artist can be, in another order, a bad man. Likewise, one can be a good man and a bad artist. One cannot do wrong things and be a good man.

In the case of prudence, however—the reason element in every act of ruling oneself, family, or polity—its ends are not open to our manipulation in the way we can picture things in art. Prudence is the intellectual of the moral virtues. It is a judgment about means to the end, first of oneself, of the family, of the city, and ultimately of our place in the order of things. Unlike art, prudence does not choose the end. The end is given by nature, and its discernment is a task of the speculative order and is given by nature. Human action follows on and pursues the end of human life already implanted in it. And if

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this end is transcendent, it means that we are not free to change it. We can reject it in practice, but we cannot change it. This possibility of rejecting our proper end is why we can talk of a “prudence” by which we “successfully” accomplish bad things, personal or political. But the very accomplishment of what is wrong is itself properly imprudent and is a vice.

Aristotle tells us, recall, that politics is the highest of the practical sciences. Hence political prudence will correspond to this priority. But politics is not the highest science as such. The practical order relates to the theoretical order as part of an ordered whole. Politics in this sense is in the service of *what man is*; it does not establish *what man is*. Politics, taking man from nature as being already man, is intended to assist him in being good man. We do not cause ourselves to be men, to be what we are. *What it is to be man* is already what we are when we come into being. This is true for every actual human being who was ever conceived or lived, including the first. We are not the principal architects of our own *what is*. It is given to us. We are not asked either to exist or to be what we are.

Art, however, has a certain likeness to the divine action. Indeed, when Aquinas spoke of creation, he spoke of it as a result of God’s practical intellect. What was created was the result of God’s willing a chosen, differentiated order into existence. This latter is the order that is open to our intellect when we reflect on ourselves and on the world in which we live. We do not run into an un-chosen world when we become aware of it and act in it. That does not mean that the world within itself is totally determined either.

We live in a world that is what it already is. But within that world, we have a certain dominion whereby we can fashion what is not ourselves to assist our purposes. In this sense, the world does not simply exist for itself. Its very order is open to intellect. But we cannot fashion ourselves into other finite beings. We remain human even in everlasting life. What we are we can understand, but we are already what we are. This fact is why our purpose in life is to become fully

what we are. But this becoming what we are in its complete sense includes our active participation in becoming what we ought to be. Augustine's "restless heart" remains the primary evidence that, at some basic level, we all realize this orientation of our own individual being.

III

"The essential character of art taken in its complete extension is to instruct us on how to make something, so that it is constructed, formed, or arranged, as it ought to be, and thus to secure the perfection or goodness, not of the maker, but of the object itself which he makes," Jacques Maritain wrote. "Art therefore belongs to the practical order in the sense that it instructs us how to make something, considering not the use we should make of our free will but the manner in which the work as such and in itself should be executed. We may thus say that art is concerned with what is to be made."¹ The question behind this observation of Maritain is whether man himself is something "to be made" or something already made, such that his *what he is* can be discoverable by reason. He is not something to be made but something to be perfected, and this by his own agency, in what he already is.

Let us suppose, however, that we reverse the priority of art and politics in our understanding of practical intellect (see above, chapter 2). Let us postulate that politics is in fact an "art" and not a "prudence." What follows? In a too-little-known book, *The Structure of Political Thought*, Fr. Charles N. R. McCoy addressed this issue in a careful, profound way. The relation of art and prudence is, in fact, key to the understanding of what Machiavelli is all about in the history of political philosophy, in the history of thought itself.

The modern theory of politics begins by reversing the order between prudence and art: It will seek a liberty that is proper not to prudence but to art—

1. Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. E. I. Watkin (London: Sheed and Ward, 1946), 198–99.

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by conformity simply of what the prince actually produces with what he intends to produce. The opening phase of modern political thought avows an indifference to the morally good; it frees man from an obligation to a moral order founded on man's given nature.²

Prudence concerns means to ends, not ends themselves.

This Machiavellian position that permits the prince to use evil or good means for his success is but a first step. If the prince is an artist of the political order, he has the freedom of art when it comes to his political subject matter. His end ought rather to be to uphold what is right and reject what is wrong. But if his subject matter, that is, the free and rational citizens, can be treated as things whose individual ends are not the concern of the prince, then he can treat them all as means to his end without having to consult them as responsible beings.

If the prince is free of the distinction of good and evil, he acquires a new sort of "freedom." He can use either good or evil means to achieve his ends. He is a successful prince if his political "creation" conforms to what it is he wants. He is not to be judged by a criterion of an abiding good and evil but by the "good" of his creation, which is successful if it is what he wants it to be. McCoy called this Machiavellian reversal but a first step. It requires raw power to put it into effect.

Is there something better? What if this new understanding of man in which he could define himself were the result not of political power but of a new understanding of nature? "Nature itself will be freed from all metaphysical and theological conceptions." The mind would thus not be subject to *what is*, nor would human beings have to conform to what they ought to be. We will reverse the priority of the theoretical to the practical order, and within the practical order, art is superior to prudence. A new kind of "liberty" will be sought.

It will seek a liberty that is proper neither to prudence nor to human art but to divine art (for divine art had always been considered to be the princi-

2. Charles N. R. McCoy, *The Structure of Political Thought* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 157.

ple of the works of nature), and it will define the good not in terms of an end which man seeks but rather in terms of the very being of man which becomes the principle from which all things are made—all things humanly significant, which becomes the totality of significance.³

We need to understand the full force of this intellectual background. Man literally replaces God as the cause of what we know in nature, including our own nature.

In this context, we have at our disposal what is in fact a “divine” art. We are free to create any sort of world or human being we want or can. No other justification is needed other than our very doing it. No “nature” exists to which we are subject. In effect, following Kant, it is the new science of physics in which this divine artistic work comes forth.⁴ “Experimental science is getting close to Him who made the universe. It is because the structure of the universe depends upon Him who made it that experimental science gets away from the ‘given-ness’ of things as ‘formed’ to things as ‘formable’”⁵ The trouble is that in the present order, we obtain our ideas about what to search for from science by the already-existing regularity in nature. This regularity suggests that nature bears an intelligence that is not merely its own, a “substitute intelligence,” as McCoy calls it. In other words, the human intellect is a receiver, not a maker of *what is*.

“The ultimate point in common between the new physics and the new politics is their unconcern, in their aspect of arts, for the familiar world of common understanding.”⁶ We live in this world of “common understanding.” Yet, we see, in the logic of the premises that McCoy has spelled out, that we have in effect rid ourselves of this human nature that is given to us. We have substituted a concept of human nature that is subject to nothing but itself. Everything is permitted except the notion that, for the human good itself, some-

3. *Ibid.*, 158.

4. *Ibid.*, 160.

5. *Ibid.*, 163.

6. *Ibid.*, 166.

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thing is not permitted. The dynamism of the modern world, including often its art, is that of a systematic defiance of the order of things that the divine art established. This defiance is possible, no doubt, because human ends and purposes must be chosen or at least accepted. The divine Artist cannot create a free creature and then remove his freedom. He is free, in other words, to defy God and create or concoct his own world.

On his part, the free creature must either accept or reject *what he is*. If he rejects it, he must logically seek to invent a theory or idea of himself and the world that does not include any of the order that is put there by the divine Artist. In the beginning, I quoted a comment of Werner Dannhauser about Nietzsche, the notion that the death of God is the foundation of man's "creativity." The word is precisely chosen. This creativity at the death of God means that no limits or restrictions can be found for what man can do with himself. Whatever he does or makes of himself, provided it is the result of his own will, is permissible. What is not permissible is to maintain that man and the cosmos are created by God with a superabundance that, when spelled out, is really what is best for man and for the universe itself. The great spiritual challenge of modern man seems to be nothing less than the eventual realization that God looks out better for him than he can look out for himself.

IV

How do we think about these things? In an old *Peanuts* scene, Lucy is sitting on the floor reading to her younger brother Linus, who is paying close attention to the words. She reads: "And so the King was granted his wish." In the next frame, Lucy continues her reading: "Everything he touched would turn to gold! Now, the next day. . . ." In the third scene, Linus suddenly leaps to his feet to shout: "Stop! You don't have to read any further! I know just what's going to happen." In the final frame, Linus is walking away, with Lucy sim-

ply looking at him. He tells her: “These things always have a way of backfiring.”

We can evidently for a time go ahead and make choices that are contrary to *what is*. We can even build nations and civilizations on such premises. We are left the freedom to make choices that carry consequences down the ages in both families and in nations. In the book of Ezekiel, we find a famous scene in which the Lord finally consents not to charge the children for the sins of their fathers. We are to be responsible only for our own sins. Yet, as we know from the doctrine of Original Sin, the free choices of others will affect us. God does not isolate us from them. This is part of the heinousness of sin. But it is also testimony to the respect that God has for the free creature. Things that look so very good will “backfire,” to quote Linus’s words. They won’t work even while they are working.

In conclusion, I should like to recall another comment of Maritain, one in which he distinguished between poetic and mystical experience. I do this in the context of my argument about art or poetry and a politics that exempts itself from the true ends of man. “Poetic experience differs in nature from mystical experience.” Maritain wrote in his *Approaches to God*. “It is concerned with the created world and with the innumerable enigmatic relations of beings with one another, while mystical experience is concerned with the principle of being with its unity superior to the world.”⁷

Maritain speaks of the divine “superabundance.” The creativity of the artist is indeed a reflection of the inner being of the Godhead. But the effect of this origin and our relation to it is not that we can find something better than the divine Artist’s generosity. Our own substitutes will leave us only with ourselves. We will be cut off from being and we will find in reality only ourselves and our own footsteps. The mystical experience, I venture to say, is the revelational answer to that science that purports to recreate the world in man’s, not God’s, image. It is concerned with, as Maritain put it, “the prin-

7. Jacques Maritain, *Approaches to God* (New York: Collier, 1962), 81.

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“...the principle of being, with the unity superior to the world.” The end for which man was created and elevated was to live the inner life of the Godhead. To contemplate this end strikes me as far more exciting and wondrous than any of the humanly made alternatives, however ingenuous or artistic, to family, polity, or cosmos.

ON “THE CONTINGENCY OF OUR OWN BEATITUDE”

But now the suffering also had been made present to him in an amplitude beyond the reach of his mind. He would never know even the extent to which its suffering had been unnecessary. It seemed to him almost proof of immortality that nothing mortal could contain all its sorrow. He thought, as we all have been taught to think, of our half-lit world, a speck hardly noticeable among the scattered lights in the black well in which it spins. If all its sorrow could somehow be voiced, somehow heard, what an immensity would be the outcry!

—Wendell Berry, “A Place in Time,” in *A Place in Time*, 236–37

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OUR BEATITUDE

But this means, quite beyond speculations about the nature of truth and its metaphysical conditions, a sort of moral dialectic that, taking as object of its search the search itself by man for God, endeavors to show the presence in the heart of man of a contingency much more tragic and disturbing than that of the universe, because it is *the contingency of our own beatitude*.”

—Etienne Gilson, “The Future of Augustinian Metaphysics,”
in *A Gilson Reader*, 101

I

We have asked about minds in the universe and, “Why do I exist in it?” Politics, arts, and crafts are the things nearest to us, the things most subject to our choice and power. Etienne Gilson’s essay on “The Future of Augustinian Metaphysics” was published in 1930, on the occasion of the fifteenth centenary of Augustine’s death in 430 AD. I recall reading this essay of Gilson probably shortly after the publication in 1957 of *A Gilson Reader*, in which it was reprinted. This essay has always existed somewhere in the back of my mind. I want to look at it in this chapter in the light of what I have been arguing about our existence as knowing beings. I am particularly interested in the dramatic notion that ultimately it is our own being that is at stake in our freedom.

The Gilson essay is, in part, a polemic with the heritage of Descartes on the starting point of philosophy, on whether we begin in things or in the mind—the “*si fallor, sum*” of Augustine and the “*cogito ergo sum*” of Descartes. Though he considered Augustine and Aquinas both to be rooted in realism, Gilson also contrasts the Thomist approach, through *what is*, with that of Augustine, through the mind and truth. He is at pains to maintain that Aquinas had the more complete philosophy. But he recognized that Aquinas was himself a devoted reader of Augustine, none better. I recall hearing a lecture of Gilson once in which he insisted that the beginning point of philosophy was the affirmation: “There are things and I know them.” He warned about trying to prove this known fact from something clearer. Nothing was more clear.

The most famous passage in all of Augustine’s vast works is, no doubt, from the *Confessions*—“Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.” (Why does that passage sound so much better if we use “Thee’s and “Thou’s?”) And, of course, this passage in turn is mindful of the two cities vying for our attention—the City of God and the City of Man, wherein we seek our ultimate rest. We also read this very Augustinian passage in the second book of *The Imitation of Christ* of Thomas à Kempis: “You have here no lasting city. For wherever you find yourself, you will always be a pilgrim from another city. Until you are united intimately with Christ, you will never find your true rest.” In each of these passages, our actual lives, even at their happiest, are depicted as still unsettled. In a sense, the whole dynamism of the universe is grounded on this primary fact. Augustinian metaphysics, Gilson will hold, begins with this existential fact, itself a real event in the real universe of each of us in our time in this world.

Originally, I had entitled this chapter “Habits without Metaphysics.” This separation between ethics and metaphysics was the basis of my approach to Gilson’s essay on “The Future of Augustinian Metaphysics.” Later, however, I considered the remarkable passages from Wendell Berry and from Gilson himself that I quoted in the beginning. I decided that the present title—On “The Contingency of Our Own Beatitude”—was a better one to bring out the point I had in mind with regard to the relation of habits to metaphysics.

“But just what was the point you had in mind?” one might inquire. Some of it, at least, has to do with Berry’s remark about the “extent to which [this] suffering [in the world] had been unnecessary.” Aquinas, citing no less an authority than Augustine himself, had inquired about God’s permission of evil. Augustine had said that God would allow evil only if, in allowing it, some greater good could come about. A world in which sin happened because of freedom was also a world in which sorrow, repentance, forgiveness, and mercy could operate.¹ The In-

1. See James V. Schall, *The Line through the Human Heart: On Sinning and Being Forgiven* (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2016).

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carnation itself, as we know it, took place through this latter route. Evidently, a universe in which sorrow can exist is “better” than one in which it does not exist. It reveals to us more of what God is really like. This view does not deny that a world without the Fall was also a very good world.

I have, in any case, long been convinced of the superiority of Aristotle’s emphasis on virtue over the modern notion of “rights” as the core of ethical and political things.² Virtues emphasize what we freely do to acquire them. “Rights” stress what someone else has to do for us. It is true that the world itself, and we in it, are things that someone else has done for us. Existence itself is a gift, not a “right.” If it were a “right,” God cannot be God, the God who was also free not to create. In our case, however, since we need not exist, our “beatitude” is contingent even for God.

This latter fact, however, does not lessen God’s omniscience but enhances it. A voluntarist theology maintains that God’s inability to do evil lessens God. The Christian God, the voluntarist rightly claims, is not “free” to make evil good or good evil. Thus, in this reasoning, God is not all-powerful. He would be more powerful if both good and evil were at his disposal. Yet, the God who is *Logos*, not *voluntas*, need not create either the world or us in it. But if He does create, He cannot subsequently cause a free being necessarily to participate in His inner life, even though such participation is the reason for his initial creation. Such a “determination” denies the free will that was given in the first place. It thus remains “contingent” on the creature’s freedom to decide its beatitude. And if this is so, it is quite likely that the world will be filled with sorrow as a result of the misuse of this freedom, as Berry indicated. It is unlikely that the world would exist at all if God refused to accept the possibility of sin and hence sorrow with the possibility of repentance, forgiveness, and mercy as remedies.

2. See James V. Schall, “On the Philosophic Connection between ‘Rights’ and ‘Oppression,’” *Philosophy, Culture, and Traditions* 10 (2014): 11–18.

All of this really brings us again to Plato, to the problem that he had, as a young man, as to whether the world was created in justice or injustice. As the *Republic* teaches, the world pretty much looks like it was created in injustice if we judge from the viewpoint of what actually goes on in existing cities. This civic disorder was also something Augustine described vividly in the *City of God*—a title whose resemblance to Plato’s *Republic* is no mere accident. In no way can we study the history of actual cities in their “this-worldly” form and not know that injustice often triumphs and justice is punished, as Adeimantus and Glaucon earnestly tell Socrates in the second book of the *Republic*.

Thus, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was proposed in a political context in Plato. It is a product of precisely political philosophy. It was argued in order to resolve the question of the justice of the world. And this doctrine included not just immortality but judgment. Without judgment of individuals with regard to how they lived, there could be no real justice, as it was the individuals who chose the disorders from which sorrows flow. And if there were no justice, there could be no God—except perhaps a voluntarist one.

Andy Catlett, in Berry’s story, came to more or less the same conclusion. Plato approached the issue from the unjust not being punished for their crimes. Berry approached it from the sorrows that are consequent on sin and injustice that are never resolved. This awareness is why “It seemed to him [Catlett] almost proof of immortality that nothing mortal could contain all its sorrows.” Obviously, Christ is called “the man of sorrows” precisely in this context.

Andy’s conclusion too has Platonic overtones. In the eschatological myth in the *Phaedo*, we have an incident that we touched on earlier, in which someone who has murdered a man is being punished forever in the rivers of Tartarus. The only way that he can escape is if the man he killed forgives him. The Christian gloss on this story is that the murder is not just against the man killed but also against

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family, friends, and polity. It is likewise a sin against the light, a sin that only the light can forgive. This solution is substantially the reason that Christ is said to have died for all sins and all sinners, whether or not either the sinner repents or the individual sinned against repents or forgives.

II

The moral virtues of which Aristotle speaks in the *Ethics* are good habits, parallel to vices, which are their contraries—bad habits. They are expressive of what a man ought or ought not to be in his living: just/unjust, brave/cowardly, temperate/intemperate, and prudent/imprudent. Basically, a virtue/vice relates to every act over which we have some control. Thus we have virtues/vices concerning our given wealth, our anger, our social graces, our wit, and the way we do or do not tell the truth.

Man is not born with virtues or vices, but acquires them through acts of the virtues or of the vices. Habits, when acquired, enable us to do what we have chosen to do more easily and smoothly. It should be noted that between virtues and vices lie the habits of continence and incontinence, that is, when we usually but not always do what we ought or ought not to do. Most people in fact are not completely virtuous or vicious, but somewhere in between in the way they control their fears, pleasures, actions, and exchanges with others.

Prudence, to recall, is the intellectual virtue of the moral virtues. It is the judgment of what is good or bad in the present act that I am considering whether to put into effect. Prudence thus must be an element in every act. What it refers to is my end, that is, that for which I do all that I do. Prudence ought to refer first of all to what I ought to be. This “what I ought to be” is the point where metaphysics comes into ethics. Thus, prudence itself is contingent on the end for which I actually live my life. In the light of a chosen end, I decide the particular actions that lead to this chosen end. We might say that the

drama of virtue and vice in any given individual life is an anticipation of its fragility or “contingency,” as Gilson put it.

Why does such fragility or contingency exist in human life? Basically, it exists to make it worthwhile or significant, even in evil. What does this mean? It means that some things cannot be had unless we freely choose them. Among these things is the completion of our own meaning, or beatitude; for we have some part in the reality of that beatitude, not what it is, but whether we will have it. Thus, it is not enough to speak of the virtues and vices. Aristotle himself talks of the practical virtues and the theoretical virtues. He rightly implies that ultimately the practical virtues, while designed to lead us to beatitude, do not really tell us what it is. We know beatitude is something for its own sake. We know it belongs to a complete life.

The practical or moral virtues practiced in existing cities can lead us to a life in which we have the leisure to look at things not constantly overcome by our selection of ends that do not lead us to happiness. That is why we need virtues, why we need to reject vices. The theoretical life itself is or can be a dangerous thing. For it is the theoretical life wherein we seek to understand just what it is that reality, particularly human reality, is about. Here we seek to know whether it is all right that we be the sort of being we are, however much we are subject so obviously to vices and deviations from the good. We live in a contemporary world that has willed to affirm that there is no order found objectively in *what is*.

III

Aquinas, following Aristotle as we mentioned earlier, defined man as the only being in this universe with both mind and hand. With the mind, he understands what is there. With his hands as tools, he could fashion what he thought, shaping what is outside of himself into what he wanted or needed. In an old Peanuts sequence, Lucy is in the background reading a book, and Linus is eating a

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jelly sandwich while looking at his hands: “Hands are fascinating things.” He continues: “I like my hands. I think I have nice hands.” While Lucy finally looks up from her book, Linus adds: “My hands seem to have a lot of character. These are hands which someday may accomplish great things. These are hands which may someday do marvelous works.”

Finally, standing in front of an unusually passive Lucy who isn't buying it, Linus goes on: “They may someday build mighty buildings, or heal the sick, or hit home-runs, or write soul-stirring novels.” He then yells at Lucy: “THESE ARE HANDS WHICH MAY SOMEDAY CHANGE THE COURSE OF DESTINY.” Lucy calmly looks at these mighty hands and says to Linus: “They've got jelly on them!” In the last scene, Linus is reduced to utter silence, as Lucy walks away.³ Of this scene, I might say that it is metaphysics modified by a bad habit. Our loftiest ideals are seen against the kind of messy beings that we in fact are. Habits perfect an already constituted being in what it is. Man is the one mortal being whose perfection does not come with his being, but only with his own input into what it is that he already is by his nature.

Gilson argues that Augustinian metaphysics consists in a realism, the reality that Augustine already is, body and soul. Neither Augustine nor anyone else is simply a natural man. “For St. Augustine . . . the initial *sum* (I am) contains the supernatural order given in his experience and his being, as well as the natural order into which the supernatural is inserted.”⁴ To isolate the natural order is to close off man's experience of himself. Augustine, as we know from his *Confessions*, was a young man with not a few faults and sins to deal with. His story is not just of Augustine pursuing the truth, but of God pursuing Augustine. He was a man with several bad habits that he was loathe to give up. He tried to justify them by theory—the Manicheans, even the Platonists, who seemed at least to be on the right

3. Found in Robert Short, *The Gospel according to Peanuts* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1967), 46.

4. Gilson, “The Future of Augustinian Metaphysics,” 98.

track. To justify our sinful ways that we do not want to question we must construct a mental world deviant from the world *that is*.

Augustine finally realized that there are things and true judgments about them. He wanted to know how this true judgment is possible. He found truth in God's search for him, Augustine.

The *primum cognitum* of St. Augustine is not God; it is man within the universe; and, within this universe and this man, the experience of a true judgment. But it must be added that the *primum cognitum* is not even the *primum reale*; on the contrary, it becomes intelligible only on condition of finding its sufficient reason in a transcendent fact which provides its explanation.⁵

The drama that went on within Augustine's soul was not a stage-show. It was a real event that was guaranteed by his understanding of God.

The hypothesis of Augustine, then, is that his experience of being "hounded by heaven," to use Francis Thompson's famous phrase, is empirical. He knows it is happening to him and that it is not a delusion or simply a figment of his imagination. "It is grace which turns knowledge into wisdom and moral effort into virtue, with the result that instead of regarding Christianity as a belated crowning of philosophy, he sees in philosophy an aspect of Christianity itself, since it is the Way, the Truth, and the Life."⁶ The moral effort itself that leads to virtue falls within the more general experience of being led to God by God.

Augustinian moral life is not that of a systematic and orderly acquisition of the natural virtues in the light of the theoretic and supernatural virtues. Rather it is a detailed reflection on the disorders of one's own soul and the errors of one's own mind. But in it is still found a thread leading the soul out of the morass of its sins and errors. This reflection means that no one, neither great sinners nor professional unbelievers, is exempt from this divine searching. God pursues man. Man seeks to explain himself to himself. Mostly it

5. *Ibid.*, 97.

6. *Ibid.*, 98.

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is not acknowledged, because man does not want it to be acknowledged. Augustine himself struggled mightily with this refusal.

It is in no case possible for man to start from God to deduce from him the creatures; on the contrary, he must mount from the creature to God. The course recommended by St. Augustine—and herein lies his peculiar contribution to the treasure of tradition—is the path to God leading through the particular creature which is man, and in man, thought, and in thought, truth.⁷

The particular man actually exists, knows that he does. He knows that he thinks. He knows that the purpose of thinking is truth. This is the way the mind works. He did not cause it to work that way, but he merely notices that it does. Thus, for a finite mind to know the truth, the truth must already exist.

In conclusion, this emphasis on the approach to metaphysics through a single, graced but contingent man brings us back to Berry's sense of immortality, a sense attributable to the enormous amount of suffering, the cause of which was not resolved or requited in this life. Likewise, it brings us to Gilson's "contingency of our own beatitude." The discussion of truth, as Gilson saw it, "brings us to a sort of moral dialectic that, taking as the object of its search the search itself by man of God, endeavors to show the presence in the heart of man of a contingency much more tragic and disturbing than that of the universe, because it is the contingency of our own beatitude."⁸ The "contingency" of the non-human universe is not conscious, nor does it depend on its own inner life. It cannot properly be called "tragic."

Human beings, on the other hand, can know how and why they are "capable of truth." They have minds that know and affirm the truth of things that actually exist. Nonetheless, we still "need to understand the presence in us of an appeal by God, who, working in our souls, creates in us a fruitful restlessness, moves, stirs our soul,

7. *Ibid.*, 102.

8. *Ibid.*

and leaves it no rest until it has finally put itself into His hands.”⁹ The “contingency of our own beatitude” is such that we can resist this divine pursuit—resist it to the end. Augustine thought, in fact, that most people did resist it to the end.¹⁰ This possibility is what I mean by “habits without metaphysics.” We form our own habits by how we live and choose. Our habits can protect us from ever being aware of things for their own sake. All is seen in the light of the end we have chosen for ourselves. We build a false picture of the world, a system, an ideology, in order to justify whatever it is we choose in place of *what is* and the search of God within our existing immortal souls.

But Augustinian metaphysics begins, not with things out there, but with the restlessness in our own souls. In this restlessness, any person can bypass what Linus called “the course of destiny” to confront the sorrows that he has put into the world, the remedy of which can be considered in immortality. There is indeed a tragedy “more profound” than that of the contingent world. That tragedy is the one that, within the finite world, does not hear the voice stirring in his soul. Augustine heard it and was glad. But there are those who hear it and “go away sad,” as in the example of the rich young man, because their habits have enabled them to reject a metaphysics open to all the phenomena that are really found in every actual human soul, among which is the voice of God calling them, no matter what they’ve surrounded themselves with. The world, I suspect, still remains filled with the “restless hearts” of which Augustine spoke. He listened. Not all do.

Let us, in conclusion, recall the two sentences that sum up the meaning of this chapter. The first reminds us that only God can account for all of human suffering. The second is that our beatitude also depends on ourselves, on how we think and how we live.

9. *Ibid.*

10. “And as the end of the world approaches, it will be difficult to find even a handful of good men within the Church on earth. Scripture tells us that in those last days sin will abound and the love of many will grow cold.” Herbert Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 37.

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“It seemed almost proof of immortality that nothing mortal could contain all its [the world’s] sufferings.”

There is “[present] in the heart of man . . . a contingency much more tragic and disturbing than that of the universe, because it is the contingency of our own beatitude.”

ON THE ANTICHRIST IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The end comes, so to speak, unannounced: the downfall takes place just as the power of the Antichrist has reached its peak. In Solovyev's legend, the Antichrist has spoken just previously, before the World Council of Christians of all denominations, which has gone over to him, of the dawning, "great new epoch of Christian history."

—Josef Pieper, *The End of Time*, 146

Who is the liar? He who denies that Jesus is the Christ. He is the Antichrist, denying the Father and the Son.

—1 John 2:22

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According to the unanimous information of tradition, the outward “success” of this regime (of the Antichrist) will be immense; its success will be a great apostasy. The fact of this mighty outward success distinguishes the Antichrist from Him to whom his name points *per negationem*.

—Josef Pieper, *The End of Time*, 143

I

According to Scripture, we struggle not only against “flesh and blood” but against “principalities and powers” (Eph 6:12). The contingency of our beatitude recognizes that real and persuasive arguments against the divine order do exist and must be dealt with if we are to have a complete grasp of the human condition. Let us here take a look at how we might consider the world we think and live in if we approach it from what we know of its end. Apocalypse is always a difficult issue, but we can learn many things from thinking about it. We find that the discussion of the end is itself a requisite to thinking at all.

Josef Pieper discussed the Western understanding of the Antichrist in, among other places, his book *The End of Time*.¹ This book is of particular interest to political philosophy. Political philosophy is concerned with, as much as the subject matter allows, understanding the temporal lives of mortal men, in both their individual and their corporate destiny. It seeks what intelligibility it can derive from the things, the words and deeds, of time. The city of man is the locus in which particular human lives are carried out. The city is an order designed to last longer than the lives of each of its citizens. It makes possible the manifestation and memory of the noble and heinous deeds that take place within its limits. The variety and order of virtue and vice that take place within a city indicate its rule, its character, and its classification.

1. Josef Pieper, *The End of Time* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999). See also Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007); Eric Mascall, *The Christian Universe* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966).

By examining time—the rise and fall of empires and cities—political philosophy comes up against its limits. Thus, it becomes aware of the concept of eternity, of transcendence, of what is beyond time. By understanding that these latter are not its domain, political philosophy acknowledges that it, while remaining important, is not itself a metaphysics or a theology. Political philosophy wonders about the relations existing among the events of time, the end of time within history, and eternity. Politics is not the highest science, Aristotle said, because man is not the highest being. At the risk of finding itself unphilosophical, of being closed to considering the whole, political philosophy cannot ignore these relationships. Plato himself, at the very beginning, was concerned with the question of whether the world was created in vain, whether injustice was in fact its final explanation. He saw that he could not solve this question without suggesting that the soul of each man is immortal. The understanding of the city required some understanding or awareness of what is beyond its temporal limits.

Political philosophy must be fully aware that it is individual men who live and die in passing time. Their “three score years and ten” mean that every city at every moment is losing and gaining new members through death and birth. Its citizens are always in motion, in time. Human beings are the “mortals,” those beings who not only die but also know that they will die. Cosmology now understands that the universe itself had a beginning, a beginning in time, in its flowing, and it is in that flowing that each person lives. Pieper shows that, strictly speaking, “history,” as distinct from chronological time, must be something that pertains only to a rational being. Stones, plants, and animals, properly understood, do not have a “history.” There is no “story” about them. They exist; they are not nothing; they have being. Their being enables our being to be.

Human persons can be understood in this same non-historical way when we look at everything about them except what they know and what they do. When we confront these latter phenomena, we

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find that each person has a unique “story” that can apply only to him, and to no one else. It is true that every human story will have certain things in common. Individual persons are born in a specific time and place, of specific parents. They marry, beget, work, wonder, and die. But the circular theory of history we find in Thucydides does not explain individual lives in such a way that they need not be actually lived to discover their particulars. Good men like Nicias after the defeat at Syracuse will die unfairly.² But they die elsewhere and not just around Syracuse at the defeat of the Athenians. Each life has its own drama that cannot be deduced from a general principle.

Since each person is unique and has an origin that is not wholly temporal, no one has the same story in the time allotted to him. But we can also ask whether the entire human race, as a collection of billions and billions of individual lives, has a “purpose.” Presumably, if each individual’s life were meaningless, so would be the status of the entire race. If the purpose of the human race is the happiness of those who reach a this worldly end down the ages of time as a result of human work, it follows that everyone who dies before this end will be but a tool for others, not someone who himself reaches this end. Moreover, the entire human race does not exist as a separate entity, as the famous frontispiece of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* implied.

The existence of what-it-is-to-be-man, including all members of the species, is in the mind. It is an abstract form, conceivable and valid, but this form does not live and die. What lives and dies are individual human beings. And it seems that their living and dying are not intelligible unless a judgment is made about them, whether they each fulfilled that purpose which was found at the origin and progress of their existence. Every human being found himself in being whether he liked it or not. He did not choose to be rather than not to be. Nor did he choose to be this person rather than that one. He was not just an animal, nor was he an angel, nor a god. But it was good that he existed even if he failed to achieve his purpose.

2. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, VII, 86.

Pieper is at pains to show that human beings, once in existence, will never be returned to precisely “nothing.” What is in their competence is not “being or annihilation,” as Plato mentioned in the *Apology*, but rather living well or badly. Existence will continue whichever choice an individual makes. Pieper asks the initial question of whether God, for some lack in Himself, was required to create what was not Himself—and, of course, He could not “create” Himself. He simply existed. God’s not having created anything at all would not imply a defect or an injustice in the Godhead. God’s being is complete whether He creates or not.

Creation is thus to be understood in the category of gift, not necessity. It arises from the abundance of being, not from lack of being. Likewise, God could, without injustice, simply cease to sustain beings in existence. Finite beings are the cause of neither their beginning nor their continuation in being. Death is not a cessation of being, but merely of one mode of being. Since God created these beings that they might “live,” they will continue in being no matter what the particular “story” that defines each of them as this, not that, person manifests about them.

II

Pieper begins his book with a brief quotation from the German poet Konrad Weiss. It reads: “The will, which is growing today ever greater, to create a condition that shall hold within it an exemplarily complete essence of humanity and an enduring peace, is burdened by the heavy paradox that it is not humanity which is the goal of the Incarnation.” This is a remarkable passage. The goal of “humanity” is that each person (not humanity) attains everlasting life as a free choice offered to him in this life.

The Weiss passage is literally a critique of specifically modern political philosophy insofar as that political philosophy seeks to claim for itself the burden of producing the perfect city for man in

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this world. Here, of course, is reflected Kant's modern project of perpetual peace and the universal duties of brotherhood. It is the only real inner-worldly alternative to doctrinal Christianity's understanding of transcendence. Much philosophy has never forgiven God for the fact that Christ had to undertake, Himself, the burden of concretely teaching us about ourselves, about what we were created for. As John Paul II often said, Christ reveals man to himself.

The best way that God could do this "teaching" of men, in the context of human reason and freedom, was to send the Word into the world, a Person who was the Word. This is the meaning of Weiss's stanza that "humanity" is not the goal of the Incarnation. Humanity as such is not "saved." What-it-is-to-be-human is an idea. Individual persons—John, Mary, Socrates—are what are saved or not saved, depending on how each lives and thinks. But "humanity" is a great temptation to the human, especially the political-ideological, mind. We love "humanity" but not the man next door, as Chesterton ironically put it.

The organization of "all men" in a common form whereby they would define themselves as human is a temptation that is difficult to resist.³ It is seemingly the purpose of that great theme of political philosophy—the best regime. Yet, in our tradition and literature, there was a human person whose purpose was precisely to organize all men in this world in a "human" kingdom. He was called the Antichrist. In Pieper's view, he becomes more and more visible as men are drawn closer together in time and polity through technology, science, and the way they live their lives.

Those who recall Robert Hugh Benson's 1910 novel, *The Lord of the World*, will remember that the final leader who is the Antichrist is a noble-sounding, charismatic, intelligent, fascinating figure. He promises to give men all things that they want to be happy. He

3. In this context, it is well to recall Leo Strauss's sentence: "Man transcends the city only by pursuing true happiness, not by pursuing happiness however understood." *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 49.

achieves the unification of man, with the free consent of most religions, including most Christians. His world city is a city of death, of complete interior and exterior control. There is no escape to another country as there is no other country. He has “unified” the world. And it is precisely when this world unification against the Gospel is achieved that, in Benson’s novel, the world ends with but a few Christians left to cling to the belief in the Incarnation.

What is striking in Pieper’s discussion of the “end times” is his careful distinction between an inner-worldly catastrophic ending of the existing human race and the transcendent end of each person who has appeared on the planet and who has been given a promise of eternal life. Pieper’s approach is, as it were, to show the “reasonableness” of revelation as a logical response to the political organization of the world. Political philosophy knows that it cannot explain ultimate things, but it also knows that an explanation might be there, somewhere.

The Antichrist will realize upon the earth a prodigious increase of power, and that not only *extensively*, but also *intensively*. The World State of the Antichrist will be in the extreme sense a *totalitarian* State. This is determined, however, not only by the lust for power and the *superbia* of the Antichrist, but at the same time by the nature of the World State itself. To become overnight a *totalitarian* State—this is the inner peril arising directly out of its very structure that threatens a World Empire, which, *per definitionem*, is devoid of neighbors and therefore unexpectedly conforms to the political islands of the Utopias.⁴

The pertinence of this passage to political philosophy can be best understood against Aristotle’s warning about a universal empire, such as that of Alexander, when he suggested that the complexity of this enterprise is so great that it could be ruled only by a divine mind or power. This is the precise power the Antichrist claims.

4. Pieper, *The End of Time*, 130.

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III

Thus, the catastrophic inner-worldly end, found in the revelational tradition of the coming success of the Antichrist, arises quite logically from a development within a political philosophy that rejects the natural and supernatural ends proposed for each human person who has existed on this planet. At one level, this world state acquires environmental and eugenic control over man. Each step—from divorce, to contraception, to abortion, to fetal experimentation, to gay marriage, to state control of family numbers and begetting—is now in place.

If we add to this mix the elimination of the nations as independent units of culture and their absorption into inter-culturalism, we see that no idea or religion can exist unless it conforms to the ethos of equality and “rights,” in which the word “rights” now means whatever the Antichrist or World State determines as the good of all. The classical and Christian views of *what man is* are specifically eliminated as undermining the World State.

Thus, while Pieper argues that this catastrophic end of mankind is what will happen, not a glorious World State Utopia, he does not conceive this result as either pessimistic or against the notion that the world is created to be good. “Therefore, despite the fact that the Christian attitude to history includes preparation for a catastrophic end within history, it nevertheless contains as an inalienable element the affirmation of created reality.”⁵ Pieper notes that martyrs never, even in their dire sufferings, deny the goodness of the world *that is*. They understand that their death is not ultimately contrary either to the purpose of the world or to their place within it.

This latter view is made possible by an understanding of the meaning of Incarnation as opposed to Utopia. While man is by nature a political animal, and this is good, he is ultimately created for a transcendent end that, though worked out within the political

5. *Ibid.*, 148.

world, transcends it. This end is the root of any human dignity in this world. It applies both to those who have lived noble lives and to those whose lives have been wretched and full of suffering but not contrary to the good. The Incarnation was designed as a means to save sinners, not to produce a worldly utopia within time. The Incarnation was, however, meant to make possible, even for sinners, an eternal life after each individual's life is completed in death. The Antichrist is pictured in terms of providing an end for man apparently in conformity to his nature, a World State in which everyone had his assigned place and function, itself assigned by the ruler who stands in the place of the Christ and all He stood for, that is, the Cross as the sign of contradiction and salvation.

We might inquire, "Why the Cross?" The Cross is not an abstract idea. Neither is it a sign of power in either the Muslim or Western ideological sense. What it is, it seems, is but a graphic affirmation of the principle that founds our civilization: the Socratic principle that it is never right to do wrong. The Cross comes into play in every human life, including that of Christ Himself, when the question "What is truth?" arises in the concrete story of any individual life, especially before civil rulers. If we look at the deaths of Socrates and Christ, both are good men killed, after a legal trial, by the best existing state of their time. Each was asked to cease doing what was right, to come down from the Cross. Had Socrates affirmed that right was wrong, or had Christ come down from the Cross, our civilization would never have come into being. The Antichrist exists to complete the end of civilization in the name of humanitarian civilization.

What we see in political philosophy, when we look at the Antichrist, who is part of this history, of this philosophy, is the systematic construction of an alternative to what is right by nature, to the eternal life that the Cross stood for. In the end, I think, the crucial truth is that we are each created, from the beginning, for a supernatural end that is, as such, beyond our nature. But it is not beyond our possibility, for we are also given the grace, if we choose, to accept

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it. Political philosophy points to itself, to politics and its limits. But its limits point to transcendence—not to an abstract Utopia in this world down the ages, but to an immediate “now” that is the completion of our existence and that is present to each human life at its completion in this world.

That Plato sensed some of this in the *Republic* should not surprise us. That his later followers did not, as Augustine said, understand the Word made flesh perhaps should not surprise us. An inner-worldly catastrophe at its end is related not so much to cosmic forces as to human beings and their choices about what they are, about what God is. And what the universe is. The avenues given to us to know these latter truths are the Creation, the Incarnation, and the Cross. These latter, the Incarnation and the Cross, are not a rejection of the world’s goodness, but only a rejection of ways to affirm it that do not correspond to *what is*, to reality.

THE UNIVERSE WE DIE IN

On Pain, Punishment, and Mercy

Lo, the Lord shall come in fire, his chariots like the whirlwind, to wreak wrath with burning heat and his punishment with fiery flames.

—Isaiah 66:15

You burdened me with your sins, and wearied me with your crimes. It is I, I, who wipe out, for my own sake, your offenses, your sins I remember no more.

—Isaiah 43:24-25

[The Holy Spirit] also says: “Their sins and their transgressions I will remember no more.”

—Hebrews 10:17

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WE DIE

I

We look at ourselves in this universe as beings that belong here. At least that is what it seems like at first sight. Though we were present on the occasion, we need to be told about the details of our own births. Chesterton, at the beginning of his *Autobiography*, remarked that we rely on the testimony of others for oral and documentary proof of our own coming into this world. With growth and maturity, we notice that we, like others of our kind, change in a certain recurring pattern. Psalm 90:10 reminds us that “Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty if we are strong.” Then it adds, quite frankly: “And most of them are fruitless toil, for they pass quickly and we drift away.” At some time in our youth, we begin to hear of sickness and death. We may know them in our own families.

We are assured that an ending in death is the lot of everyone, no exceptions. We are not sure what to make of this information except that it seems to be quite accurate. Sooner or later we attend our first funeral. Approximately 155,000 people, on the average, die each day somewhere in the world. Death is part of the reality of life. It also seems pretty final. We do hear sometimes of scientific efforts to “lengthen” our life spans for decades, perhaps centuries. We hear talk of freezing bodies until such time that medicine can find a cure for what kills us. We can then, it is hoped, be “un-thawed” and cured, apparently without further aging in the meantime. Cloning seems to be a desperate effort to keep at least what looks like us alive beyond our normal length of days.

But if this is the universe we live, act, and think in, it is also the universe we die in. Most people can understand that if death never happened either to men or to animals, this world would be quickly filled with very many and very ancient beings. Death, from that aspect, seems to have its purpose. The correlation between births and deaths seems eventually to balance out. The question has been asked, as we have seen (see chapter 1), about whether the total

number of human beings intended for this planet is fixed.¹ The old refrain, “If I had my life to live over,” incites us to ask ourselves whether we would live a better life if we could begin again, or if we would even want to be given a second chance. This was the issue considered in the last book of Plato’s *Republic*. There, it was wisely concluded that if we did not live rightly our first time, we probably would not do so given any number of other opportunities. Our dignity, in other words, is to be given one life to live.

Though most modern men are leery of associating punishment with God, Scripture itself has no such hesitation. When God is said to be “angry,” it is always over something that anyone, not just God, ought to be angry about. Anger itself is a proper emotion and response to obvious evil and injustice. If nothing angers us, then we stand for nothing. To be angry at the wrong things indicates a lack of virtue or intelligence. To look upon evil deeds as if it made no difference in the world whether they be good or bad is to understand neither the world nor evil. If we had a world in which punishment was neither helpful nor necessary, we would already be in a sinless world, which, quite evidently, is not our present situation.

Where, we might ask, are we to fit an understanding of punishment into our thinking? In a basic sense, it is one of those things, like evil and death, that ought not to be, was never intended to be, but still has its place in the existing world. Punishment arises because of an event that is related to our freedom. Once the power of choice was used in a way contrary to our own good and God’s purpose for us, punishment came into the picture as a consequence. Punishment involves genuine freedom. When a lion kills and eats a zebra, the zebra is not being “punished” for something. The one who is properly “punished” is the one who did something that, judged by some objective standard, he should not have done. It is a proportionate consequence to the evil done to others. Punishment, more-

1. See James V. Schall, *Human Dignity and Human Numbers* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1971); “Alternatives to the Family,” *Faith and Reason* 26 (Spring 2001): 107–24.

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over, is meant not just to deter others from wrongdoing, though it is intended for that purpose also. The intention of punishment is that the one who committed the evil deed acknowledge that he was wrong.

We can look on punishment in purely negative terms, as simply mindless and unbridled retaliation. But punishment properly speaking is a response to something that was wrongly put into the world by our free choices. If we list the things for which we are punished, sort them out according to their severity, we obtain a pretty good idea of what the law—or the one who carries out the punishing—thinks is right and what wrong.

Punishment is conceived as a response to an action that is wrong or evil, to a rule that is violated. The gravity of the punishment is more or less supposed to relate to the seriousness of the delict, or crime. We do not punish automobile parking violations the same way that we punish murder. Still, we do have some punishment meted out for both as a sign that the law is important and to be obeyed. The punishment does not itself establish the reason for thinking some action is wrong and hence susceptible to punishment. Rather punishment is designed to reinforce reason, especially when reason is lacking in the one who commits the fault or sin.

This recognition is why “fear of the Lord” can also be a good thing. We may do the right thing not because we understand the evil of doing otherwise, but because we “fear” the punishment. This “fear,” at least sometimes, prevents us from doing something wrong. If we do “intend” to do something wrong, but do not do it because of fear, we still may sin in intention, but we leave objective reality as it is. The man whom we “might have” murdered is still alive and well—a good thing.

II

To have a complete understanding of forgiveness and mercy, we need to examine punishment.² In the beginning, two issues must be distinguished. The first is whether some act or other is wrong. Once this issue is decided, punishment is added to show the seriousness of the evil involved. Second, a proper punishment pertains to positive law. It must be settled by lawful government. It can vary in time and circumstance. Prudence will also be needed to decide whether the same punishment, say, jail or a fine, is due to everyone. There can be degrees of fault. Many mitigating circumstance can intervene, about which it is impossible to legislate in advance.

Yet, we might still ask: “Why punish at all?” I have previously mentioned Plato in regard to the issue of punishment. There is a reason for this reference. One of the most famous, if not the most famous discussions of punishment is found in Plato’s dialogue, the *Gorgias*. It is here that Socrates says, much to the horror of a leading politician, that, if we do something wrong, we should not only be punished but we should want to be punished. It is one thing to maintain that a crime ought to be punished, but another to argue that the one committing the crime ought to *want* to be punished.

However startling this view might initially sound, when we look at it carefully, it makes sense. How did Socrates think about this matter of wanting to be punished for our crimes and sins? The first step is that some actual person willingly does some evil act. He almost always does so with some excusing justification in his own mind for doing it. That is, he has an explanation of reality that allows him to do the evil act. Logically, this reasoning is but another form of pride, now appearing in one’s own particular acts. The thought-about deed is next put into the world by choice.

The objective act, whether good or evil, has its own consequences

2. See James V. Schall, *The Line through the Human Heart: On Sinning and Being Forgiven* (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2016). See also Josef Pieper, *The Concept of Sin* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001).

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on the actor and on others, no matter what the subjective intention of the one who does it. If, say, we kill someone, he is dead. If we rob a bank or a store, someone is deprived of his rightful goods. The person who does the act is now forever the person who did this or that at a definite time and place. In other words, the world now has within it a lack of a good that ought to have been there. It has a disorder that ought not to have existed.

If the man who commits the crime does not change his mind until he dies, he dies with this act on his soul. He will be judged accordingly, if Plato and Scripture are right about the Last Judgment. But let us suppose the man realizes that he ought not to have done what he did. In other words, he admits to himself and to the world that his action has caused disorder in the world, in his own life, and in that of others. The first thing he needs to do is to acknowledge that he was wrong in doing the act. This acknowledgement is, in part, what humility means. Next he needs to find a way to rid himself of the responsibility or guilt caused by his sins. He must look about for some institution or way of forgiveness. He realizes that he is held accountable for his acts by something greater than himself.

The confession of sins in the Sacrament of Penance is the central locus of this forgiveness. It is aware of the divine dimensions of all our actions. But the sacrament's validity depends on the sinner's desire to be forgiven. It requires another free act. To repent, the sinner needs to acknowledge that his effort, implicit in his sin, to rewrite the rules of good and evil was ill-founded. Sins do cause disorder. But now we see that he announces to himself and to God at least, and (indirectly) to everyone, that the law or rule of reason was right all along. He wishes to reaffirm this as a step in repairing the damage of his act. He may not consciously understand every one of these steps, but implicitly this is what he is doing.

The final step is penance and punishment. Socrates said that the sinner wants to be punished. The worst thing that could happen to him would be that he was not punished. Why? Because that would

indicate that he really did not admit his action or see its disorder. But when he voluntarily accepts the punishment, he shows to the world two things: (1) that he understands what is the right order and (2) that, by the sign of this punishment, he restores that order and shows as best he can its seriousness. So punishment is not so irrational after all. If we are just punished with no conscious repentance, confession, or concern about forgiveness, nothing is changed. We are, in principle, still in our sin.

In speaking of punishment, it is often said that the sole purpose of punishment is the reform of the criminal, or the protection of the public order. Punishment does imply a willingness to repair the evil that our acts caused. It is on this basis that clemency and forgiveness can more easily be offered. But the main point that I want to make in this chapter is that suffering due punishment both restores confidence in the goodness of the law of reason and allows us to grant that the one who broke the law now understands the law's rightness. Punishment in this sense is freely "suffered." It is not hostile to forgiveness but helps to provide its foundation.

III

The fact of sins is one thing. Their forgiveness is another. Judgment and punishment decide the seriousness and consequences of what is wrong. Steps are taken to prevent them and to deal with the one who caused the problem. Christ said that more joy is found in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who have nothing to repent (Lk 15:7). We usually look at sin from the angle of its reality and the need to do something about it. But another fruitful way to think about our lives is to ask: "What becomes of forgiven sins?" Once sins are forgiven, should we brood on them? Certainly we should not become scrupulous and constantly worry that we have not done everything we need to do to explain them. The fact is that a person's sins can be forgiven only when they are acknowledged.

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In approaching this issue, we must think of it in terms of why evil exists in the world. It exists as a consequence of freedom within a good creation. God's initial response to sin was not to destroy the world or the sinner. Rather, and this is surprising at first, it was to let it go on with its consequences. God's response to sin was His mercy. That is, it was that aspect of His original love that manifested itself when things, because of freedom, did not go as they should have. Briefly put, instead of responding by destroying the sinner, God responded by sending His only-begotten Son into the world. As we have noted before, God could not "force" men to repent. Coerced repentance would mean God made men free and not free at the same time. But He could invite them to repent on their own, especially once the consequences of their sins became manifest to them.

In a famous passage that St. Thomas cites from St. Augustine, God permitted evil in the world only if, by it, a greater good would result.³ In a paradoxical way, then, we can say that every sin is itself an occasion for some other good to come into the world, one that is usually outside the immediate comprehension of the sinner but not outside the consequences or surroundings of the sinful act. Moreover, any repentant sinner, who realizes the full weight of his deeds, needs to understand that it is all right for him to go on living. He cannot and should not forget the fact of his sin. But he is not to commit suicide or to lapse into a complete depression either. Once sins are forgiven, they are forgiven. Strictly speaking, God does not bring good out of evil. Evil is not a "thing," but the lack of something due. A sin is an act we put into the world that lacks proper order. But sin always has aspects of the good in it. It is out of this good that the redemption of sins can take place.

Christ said to the woman, "Go and sin no more" (Jn 8:11). God "forgets" our sins; that is, they no longer are held against us (Is 43:25). This forgetting does not mean that they never happened.

3. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 90, 1, ad 3.

Forgiven sins are not “forgotten.” They become the source in which their initial damage begins to be repaired. “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner” identifies the man for what he is (Lk 18:13). We need not, indeed ought not, pester everyone by telling them how bad we were. That could be a kind of pride or boasting. But we do not wish to deny the truth of our lives.

A question we might ask ourselves then is this: “Is there any ‘good’ in forgiven sins?” As we mentioned, we are familiar with the notion of bringing good out of evil, or, better, of bringing good out of the good in which evil exists. Such a question, no doubt, would arise only if we accepted the central teaching of the New Testament about the forgiveness of sins. In our souls, we can carry with us both forgiven and unforgiven sins. When we repent of our sins, we can confess them to the priest and seek forgiveness. Contrition and confession belong together in a whole, though they can be distinguished. In some cases when confession is not possible, contrition is sufficient. The priest says finally, “I absolve you from your sins.” He does not do this absolving on his own authority but “through the ministry of the Church, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” He is an instrument, not a cause. His “I absolve” is the instrument God uses to have our sins forgiven.

In Plato’s discussion of the final judgment in the last book of the *Republic*, he postulates the possibility of our choosing a new life, a new “spirit,” after this present disordered one. It turns out that what we freely did in this life conditions what we choose in the next. We are after all the same person at both stages. The implication is that, if we do not live a virtuous life the first time around, it is not likely that we will do much better with a second or third lifetime. This was the same point in the story of Dives and Lazarus in the New Testament (Lk 16:19–31). Basically, this Platonic myth is in accord with the New Testament and with Aristotle. It affirms that we have this one life in which what we are for eternity is decided ultimately by ourselves, by how we respond to the call to repentance, by how we

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choose to live and deal with our own actions, by our recognition of the good.

In thinking of “forgiven sins,” it is clear that any deed, good or bad, once done or any word once spoken does not change. What could have been otherwise is now fixed by our choice. All acts, good or bad, once we put them in effect, remain what they are forever. The recollection of forgiven sins is part of the record of any human life. It is not completely to be forgotten. Forgiven sins are part of the historical record of our lives. They are the result of Christ’s call to repentance. Their reality is included in the account of any human life. But someone who has sinned, repented, confessed, even been punished, speaks of his life with knowing authority. He knows that he had a problem. He thus becomes a witness to the truth of what the Gospel is about. The witness of the sinless Christ was to take on the sins of the world in His suffering. The witness of the repentant sinner upholds the order of goodness in things.

The witness of the repentant sinner is of great worth to those who need to understand the consequences of their own actions. Those who consider themselves sinless sometimes seem to speak with less insight than the repentant sinner. This is why St. Augustine seems to speak with such force, for he speaks as a sinner. We look at the two thieves crucified next to Christ on the Cross. Both were admittedly punished for just reasons. One asked Christ to save him if He were the Messiah. The other simply asked to be remembered when He came into His Kingdom (Lk 24:39–43). It is quite clear that the differing reasons given by these two men as they asked for Christ’s aid teaches us what we need to know about mercy and forgiveness: We need to know that God is merciful to sinners. We also need to know that He cannot grant mercy if we are not willing to accept it.

Augustine’s famous “confessions” were devoted to remembering his sins before God in order to set the record straight. Once Augustine knew that God knew that he (Augustine) was aware of his own

sins, he could go on. In both Isaiah and its reference in Hebrews that began this chapter, God says that our sins would be no longer “remembered.” This passage provides us with some understanding about the divine mercy in the context of the forgiveness of sins. As I have said before, this “not remembering” does not mean that the fact of what we did is forgotten. The consequences of our sins, both repented ones and un-repented ones, remain realities and forces in the world. But it is out of this “not remembering” of God that we can be assured that, in spite of our sins, events will take place that God has willed to happen.

Suppose a good woman’s husband is murdered. In a few years she remarries and has children who could not have existed unless the first crime had taken place. Whether the one who committed the murder was repentant or not makes no difference. Nor does it make any difference whether the first husband was ready to die when he did die, though we hope he was. But what (i.e., the child) came from something that should not have happened, that is the murder, is God’s way of not remembering our sins and crimes. In the end, our forgiven sins are forgotten in our repentance. But they exist in the world as facts out of which goods (and other evils) that we do not and cannot anticipate arise. The love of God is shown in the mercy of God. The same creative love that brings goods into existence in the first place manifests itself as mercy in the light of things that ought not to have “existed” but did come about in the world.

We only need to add that un-repented sins also have their consequences. Out of them also, God’s mercy works good for others. But God cannot force repentance and still have the kind of beings we are in the world. This is why the now familiar question of Plato about whether the world was created in injustice always remains. Ultimately, as we think these realities of the world out, a time of judgment comes. All the good in both repented and un-repented sins is accomplished in God’s mercy. What remains, evidently, is an eternity of abiding by our choice, by essentially that same kind of choice

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presented first in Genesis, but now essentially repeated in each of our lives: the choice whether “men will be like gods,” claiming to have the power to make the distinction of good and evil, or will discover the distinction already made, receiving it as a gift that alone completes our lives. Such are the outlines of the universe we die in.

ON PHILOSOPHY AND ENCHANTMENT

The disenchantment of God and nature necessitated a new description of good and evil. To adapt a formula of Plato about the gods, we do not love a thing because it is good; it is good because we love it. It is our decision to esteem that makes something estimable. Man is the esteeming being, the one capable of reverence and self-contempt.

—Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 197

Philosophy is concerned with genuine universality, with a complete understanding, with “totality,” with absolute truth. (It may sound like arrogance, but in reality the concept “absolute truth” is a tautology). But it is never anything but an individual who thinks the whole. . . .

—Robert Spaemann, “A Philosophical Autobiography,”
in *A Robert Spaemann Reader*, 13

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Men are constantly attracted and deluded by two opposite charms: the charm of competence, which is engendered by mathematics . . . and the charm of humble awe, which is engendered by meditation on the human soul and its experiences. Philosophy is characterized by the gentle, if firm, refusal to succumb to either charm.

—Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 40

I

With the judgment and forgiveness of God, we see that we have to bring back into our understanding of existence an understanding of the now-existing universe that was not possible without revelation directed to reason. The revelational account of man's origin and destiny was considered by much modern thought to be an illusion or an "enchantment," something perhaps nice or charming but with no substance to it. The alternative to this religious illusion, as it is often called, was a scientific, mathematical reason that was said to account for everything, so that we did not need any God or revelation. But as we see the alternatives to God working themselves out in history, a second look at revelation makes sense, a "re-enchantment" whereby the revelational account is both countercultural and eminently "reasonable."

In the musical *South Pacific*, we hear a haunting, romantic ballad that begins: "Some enchanted evening / You may see a stranger / You may see a stranger / Across a crowded room, / And somehow you know, / You know even then, / That somewhere you'll see her again and again." The "enchanted evening," the "enchanted" world, was a teleological world, a world of happenings, of meanings, though often obscure ones. Things, even chosen things—perhaps especially chosen things—even sins, even deliberate deviations from the good, were what they were. Good did not become evil, nor evil good.

Once their causes were in place, things followed; and such a world indicated both stability and change, as Aristotle had noted. What happened in the world was not a dream or an illusion, even when it happened inside of us. Thought was a real activity. We

could even identify dreams as dreams. And things did happen in the world—comedies and tragedies, ordinary things and amazing things, shocking things and degrading things. I would add “boring” things, except for Chesterton’s remark that there is no such thing as a boring thing, only bored people. All of reality bears its own fascination if we know how to see it. Life is about seeing life, and then, on seeing it, living with it—or perhaps not seeing, to live without what we should have seen.

The “enchanted” world was a world in which, everywhere we looked, we found traces, footprints, of the divine or at least of story, intelligence, and order. Psalm 139:8 reads: “If I go up into the heavens, Thou art there; if I sink to the nether world, Thou art present there.” Diverse things fit together because they are different from one another; yet they belong together. A puzzle of a thousand identical pieces is no puzzle, makes no demands. The world was “created,” yes, created *ex nihilo*, so that each existing thing bore the sign both of nothingness and of intelligence. Each thing could lapse back into nothingness if the cause of being did not sustain it. The fact of being intelligent is what enabled us to recognize that this thing is not that thing. We thus could say of *what is* that it is and of what is not, that it is not, as Plato taught us.

The title of these reflections is not “the philosophy of enchantment,” but “philosophy and enchantment.” Philosophy itself manifests signs of enchantment. It begins in wonder, not necessity. Enchantment can, indeed, be considered philosophically. It is a phenomenon worthy of reflection. The allure of the very existence of mind in the world causes, in those who have mind, an awareness that its own existence is not fully explained by itself. Mind exists before it actively thinks about the fact *that it is*. We have mind because we are what we are. We are not mind itself. Mind does not explain to itself why it is something, not nothing. Philosophers, as Leo Strauss put it, honorably strive not to be enchanted, not to be influenced by charms and spells. The fact that philosophers consciously strive to

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avoid the charm of existing things suggests that such charm is not wholly imaginary.

Philosophers want to see things *as they are*. But what does it mean to “see things as they are?” Does it necessarily mean that nothing is enchanting about *what is*? Of course, philosophy cannot be philosophy if it chooses not to consider something, something of the whole and something within the whole. It cannot say “I think of everything but this or that.” Any exclusionary or reductionist tendency that philosophy too often manifests is related to philosophy’s stance before revelation, often said to be the source of all enchantment. John Stuart Mill, I believe, thought that belief in a transcendent order was a “charm” that prevented our seeing reality instead of perceiving the transcendent order as a light that enabled us to see reality more clearly. But we find a curious intelligibility in revelation that relates directly to issues that arise from being and living themselves. Revelation seems to tell us something we need to know but do not yet grasp in spite of our most valiant efforts to account, with our own powers, for all things, including ourselves.

The lines that separate myth, fairytale, metaphysics, theology, and Gnosticism exist because the finite reason we find in ourselves is not totally satisfied by the remarkable number of things that it does in fact know. We learn one thing at a time. We distinguish this thing from that thing because this thing is not that thing. The very definition of the mind, as Aristotle put it, is the capacity to know *all that is*. The history of philosophy tells us that this capacity to know has amazingly been made actual. It is not imaginary. We do know things and know that we know, itself an indication that our minds are not simply physical objects. Even the person who denies that we can know anything tries to convince others of the correctness of his views, an irony of the most profound sort. But what we do know also tells us that much is still left to be known, including the perennially basic questions: “Why is there something at all?” “Why are there minds in the universe to know things as they are?”

Philosophy limits itself to what can be known by “reason,” when reason is taken to mean only a certain kind of reason, that discursive reason which concentrates on the quantified things in the cosmos. This is the same reason, however, that knows and identifies contradictions. To know this incoherence, we have to be able to hold many things together at the same time in our minds and to compare them. In order to see the humor in something, one must hold together in one place all the elements of the thing that causes laughter. This holding together will include the meaning of words, any differing meanings to the same word. The mind holds these different aspects together and sees the relations of things to each other in a way that is not directly seen in the realities to which the words refer. We could do this simultaneous comparison only if our minds were not solely material. We know, in other words, that what we know is not simply quantified matter, though we know matter too. The knowing power has something immaterial about it. Otherwise it could not do what it does quite naturally and, yes, quite accurately.

II

In proper French manners, young ladies and gentlemen are taught, on being introduced to someone, to respond to the one being introduced with the word *enchantée* or *enchanté*—that is, I am enchanted to meet you, or I am charmed on meeting you, or perhaps I am charmed because I meet you. This rather elegant French response is worth some reflection. The person, say, Jean-Paul, is introduced by a third party to Marie. She responds, “*enchantée*,” to Jean-Paul. The response recognizes something present here that is more than just a name or just statistics. The verb *enchanter* comes from the Latin verb *incantare*, which means to cast a magical spell, to bewitch, to beguile, to charm. Thus, to cast a spell on someone will mean to take him over, to guide his actions, either for good or ill. The word implies, in its roots, that there are also creatures about that are stronger than we are.

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They draw us to them out of ourselves, though not necessarily against our wills. We can resist or accept them. We are not automata.

In the French response, however, we find an awareness, on the part of the one to whom the introduction is made, of a reality that is not exhausted by the descriptive facts about the one being introduced. The person who is enchanted is the person who meets another from outside of herself. Now, knowledge is always awareness of our sociality, of our being with others in the same world, others whom we do not know, or do not know fully. Indeed, we cannot even know ourselves unless we know something else first. We know ourselves only reflexively when we are actively knowing something or someone else. The verb *enchanter* is passive. The person to whom the introduction is made is the one who recognizes, who is enchanted by what is found out there in the other.

Of course, this being enchanted must recognize good as well as wicked spirits in the other. The word “spells” or “charms” often had this more ominous meaning, as if to warn us that we must, especially in what enchants or charms us, still “discern spirits,” as St. Ignatius once put it. This admonition is mindful too of St. Paul’s warning that we are not dealing merely with flesh and blood but principalities and powers (Eph 6:12). A totally disenchanted world would mock these concerns and leave us unprepared to deal with them. The scientific effort to explain all things of the spirit in terms of a methodology based on quantity must presuppose that only material things exist. And material things, in this view, can only inform us. They cannot charm us. This would be a good theory if it could explain rather than avoid the reality of enchantment that happens to us.

III

In an old *Peanuts* cartoon sequence, Charlie and Linus are standing in a small garden before a very tiny but growing tree that is now about half their heights—and they are pretty short. Charlie says to

Linus, who is staring at it, “It’s a beautiful little tree, isn’t it?” In the next scene, both boys are squatting to have a better look at it. Linus replies, “Yes, it is.” In the third scene, both are standing again, while Charlie pensively reflects, “It’s a shame that we won’t both be around to see it when it is fully grown.” To this poignant philosophical reflection, Linus innocently replies to a perplexed Charlie, “Why? Where are we going?”¹

Most of us, on following that scene, would call it “charming.” Both boys are fascinated by the beauty of a seedling just beginning to grow into a tree. The look on their faces is that of enchantment or awe. It is, to be sure, a cartoon. The characters are like actors in a drama or characters in a novel. They do not really “exist” except in the way that artists can make things exist for us. Yet, no one misses the point. Reality is touched here. Linus is not quite old enough to grasp the idea that the planting of trees is a symbol that living things go on beyond the lifetimes of the individual men who plant them, even if they are little boys when the tree is just beginning its growth.

Planting a tree is an act of faith that something that lasts beyond the limits of our own lives is still worth beginning. Cicero mentions this fact in his essay “On Old Age.” Otherwise, we would plant only lettuce, corn, or carrots, which come to maturity in but a few weeks. Charlie is already aware that a fully grown tree, like a fully grown man, is more complete in its maturity. It is intended gradually to pass through various stages of growth and decline. Charlie did not mention that the same tree eventually will be old and dying. But that awareness too is involved in the planting of trees. Old trees are replaced by new sprouts that are similar to those that fascinate Charlie and Linus.

Thus far, I have sought to recall that charming, engaging things occur in this world. They enliven us to wonder how such things can be. We cannot but notice them. We need to account for them. The three terms—enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment—

1. In Robert Short, *The Gospel according to Peanuts* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1967), 56.

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have come to the attention of historians, philosophers, and theologians, as well as of poets and musicians. Initially, enchantment referred to the myths and accounts in the lore of different peoples that accounted for the meanings and origins of this world and of human life in it. Josef Pieper wrote: “The question is . . . whether we ourselves are convinced there is reality in the things the myths speak of, the idea that all being proceeds from the ungrudging goodness of the Creator, the occurrence of primeval guilt and punishment, judgment on the other side of death.”² Though expressed in many different images and accounts, this traditional core of meaning was handed down in the great myths. Taken literally, no doubt, they are fanciful. But they do reveal something of our being that remains true.

The disenchantment of the world began with efforts to explain why these myths could not be true. Plato himself complained of those myths he found in Homer, at least insofar as they depicted the gods themselves carousing and lying and betraying. He wanted myths that were philosophical, myths that did not contradict reason, but supported it. He wanted myths that were true. This is what the *Republic* is—a true myth. The questions raised by the myths remained: What was reasonable? Why was there anything reasonable to be found in the first place?

The ancient distinction between black and white magic addressed itself to the same issue: How do we make this thing into that? Is there a magician who can do it? Can we bypass the natural steps of change? Do we cast a spell on a frog who becomes a boy? Do we change iron into gold? We wanted results without the need to work for them. We really wanted instantaneous control of all things, a divine quality. White magic came to represent what we now call science and technology. It was the discovery of what exactly iron was, what frogs were, even what boys were. They were certain kinds of things, natures, as it were. They displayed a definite limit, an order.

2. Josef Pieper, *The Platonic Myths* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2011), 60.

We could identify things, reconfigure them. There was nothing mysterious about them once we understood them, or so we thought.

The “modern project,” as Strauss called it, meant the conquest of nature by the human mind.³ It meant that we could know what things are and use them, in that form, for our own purposes. The need for mystery and myths disappeared. We knew what things were. We thus had power over nature, as Bacon said. The limit of this approach came when we realized that man himself could apparently be subject to the same science to which the rest of the things in the cosmos were subject. The perfection of science came to mean the elimination of any mystery in things, including human things.

The disenchantment of the world was completed only when it was realized that the natures we discovered in the cosmos contained within themselves no explanation of why they were what they were. Their existence was contingent, dependent on something not themselves. Nature, as it were, was not full of diverse natures, each with a name. Nothing, including man, needed to be the way it was. Therefore all things were changeable and ought to be changed if we so wished.

Classical thought had presumed that the things in nature bore signs of intelligence, if not a “substitute metaphysics,” as Charles N. R. McCoy once put it.⁴ But a “substitute intelligence” is still intelligence rooted in something, in intelligence itself. Classic myth and fairytale assumed that things had a reason for being what they are. If there was change, as there surely was, there was a reason for it. The myths explained the changes in one way, reason and experiment explained the same thing in another way. The cosmos was not a chaos: it revealed order. A discovered order depends on what put it in its original order. But what if we suppose there is no intelligence behind order? Suppose we “deconstruct” or “disenchant” nature in such a way that nothing needed to be the way it was. This is what would follow if we deny a First Mover or a Logos. Indeed, it is what did follow on denying it.

3. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 3.

4. Charles N. R. McCoy, *The Structure of Political Thought* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 220.

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This denial of a first cause supposedly “liberates” nature. Nature no longer reveals, even with its recorded regularities, anything but itself, which has no reason for being itself. Mind is not bound to reality such that its function is to affirm or deny whether what is there is indeed there. What is left—though it too is unexplained—is simply “stuff” that we can make into whatever we want it to be. This is the old principle of *materia prima*, prime matter, cast in a new form, or at least given to a new mind—this time human, not divine—to fashion. What we once called nature is now simply something to be refashioned according to our desires. We must re-imagine, re-enchant the world with forms that do not alienate us because they come from us, unrelated to any transcendent intelligence. We are free to order the world in our own image. But, as we saw, human beings now have no nature, no measure, except perhaps the “right,” backed by the state, to be whatever they want to be. The belief that a given nature existed is a myth that we have overcome. How was this accomplished?

Marx’s view was as good as any. What we needed to do was systematically, step by step, eliminate those annoying features of human life said to be “by nature.” That is, we need to eliminate, since they are signs of transcendent order in nature, the distinction of the sexes, the purpose and institution of the family, and the begetting of children. On the horizon of transhumanism, the eradication of death and the equalizing of all distinctions have become scientific and political goals to achieve what is called human perfection. These are the things Plato spoke of in the *Republic*. Only now, they are no longer in a “city of speech” but come to dwell amongst us.

In Plato, the good was not constructed. It simply was, as were those things that reflected its effects in being. In a disenchanting world, what is left is only a prime matter to be refashioned in the light of man’s power and unlimited purpose. Nothing that can measure such power or purpose exists outside of the self-contained universe. Pythagoras apparently turned out to be right. Man is the measure of all things. His mind is not measured by *what is*. That is,

he can find no intelligence, no enchantment in what is not himself. And what he does find in himself need not be or remain.

Yet, as Pieper said, in the tradition of enchantment “[a]ll being proceeds from the ungrudging good of the Creator.” The key word is “ungrudging”; that is to say, being is a gift, not a necessity. We find in finite being both nothingness and *what is*—each existing thing has two directions, one to nothingness, the other to the cause of being. By themselves things would be reduced to nothingness if there were no cause of being as such. But reality as we know it need not be. The world is filled not with what is “owed” to it by someone, but with what is “given,” and given abundantly and freely, irrevocably.

The re-enchantment of the world could arise from two conflicting sources. One would be from a Gnostic ecological myth that envisioned the limits of growth in such a way that it had to re-propose an inner-worldly, non-transcendent purpose for mankind, rather than, as the other source would have it, a salvation for each individual who appeared within the world but who, on leaving it in death, does not cease to be.

III

In a section of *The Silmarillion* called “On the Rings of Power and the Third Age,” Tolkien wrote: “Thus began the Third Age of the World, after the Eldest Days and the Black Years; and there was still hope in that time and the memory of mirth, and for long the White Tree of the Eldar flowered in the courts of the Kings of men, for the seedling he had saved Isildor planted in the citadel of Anor, in memory of his brother, ere he departed from Gandor.”⁵ There is something haunting about such a passage. But the phrase that is most striking is the one that reads “the memory of mirth,” as if what is given can be lost yet not forgotten.

This is the same word that Chesterton used at the end of *Ortho-*

5. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1977), 294.

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doxy when he remarked that the one thing that the Lord did not reveal to us while He was among us was precisely His “mirth.” He did not do so, Chesterton thought, because we could not bear it. Bear what? We could not bear the joy of the kingdom for which we are in fact created. It was the thesis of Tolkien that the myth that is frequently called “revelation” is unbelievably true because it is too good to be true. It is not the evil and disorder that man cannot or will not bear, but the good to which each person is individually ordered in initial conception in the bosom of the Trinity before the world began.

The passage in the New Testament that seems most illuminating about myths is 2 Timothy 4:3–4: “For the time will come when the people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity [lit. itching ears], will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be directed to myths.” In this passage myth is what is resorted to when sound doctrine is rejected. This imagining is what we still call Gnosticism, when the sole source of myth is the human imagination presupposed to no reality, to no *what is*.

Sound doctrine is the re-enchantment that finally comes with the realization that reality itself does bear the footprints of the divine order. This is why we sense in each existing thing, in each encounter with one another, that something more than bare fact takes place. We can miss seeing it not because it is not there, but because we do not want to admit it is there. We do not, in the end, want to admit that we are created, from the beginning, for something that, when we meet it face-to-face, enchants us. In this refusal lies the outline of the logic that carries us back to a world in which nothing exists but ourselves. This wholly self-centered world was once called “hell.”⁶ In the end, I suspect, this is still the best word for it.

6. See James V. Schall, “A Brighter Side of Hell,” in *The Modern Age* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011), 73–84.

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Since man always remains free and since his freedom is always fragile, *the kingdom of good will never be definitively established in this world*. Anyone who promises the better world that is guaranteed to last for ever is making a false promise; he is overlooking human freedom.

—Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, par. 24b

To be always looking at the map when there is a fine prospect before you shatters the “wise passiveness” in which landscape ought to be enjoyed. But to consult a map before we set out has no such ill effect.

—C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, vii

I

Every civilized city is an active order composed of mortal men during the time they are precisely the mortals, that is, finite beings

This chapter originated as a lecture given to the Institute of the Incarnate Word, Chillum, Md., March 11, 2011.

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who die and know they will die. Politics as such describes their order insofar as they are alive in this world. The existing polity reflects the inner order or disorder of the citizens' souls as they associate to achieve the end they define as happiness. Politics, which is natural to man, does not in principle affirm that this world is the individual citizen's only destiny.¹ Men are by nature, to be sure, political animals. What they are fully capable of being as mortals is not possible outside the polity.

Yet what men are is not wholly completed within the city either. All cities are limited cities. What is not mortal belongs to the immortals. Intelligence is said by Aristotle to be "divine." It too belongs to the immortals, to what does not change. Man is the mortal being who is also "divine," that is, who participates by his intelligence in the things that do not change. That he can so participate is the reason why he is also said to be, through his soul, immortal. Neither man nor the world is complete without intelligence. And the fact of intelligence leads to the question whether intelligence in knowing *what is* can know its origin if that origin is offered to it to know.

Whatever be the size of the city, great or small, in any era or location, we find men in it constantly being born and others, at the same time, dying. Our cemeteries, insofar as we still have them, are designed by the city to lead those still alive to remember the dead who were once born in the city and what they accomplished. The memories, laws, deeds, customs, music, and sayings of the dead remain alive in the cities and in part define those cities as what they are, insofar as they are not forgetful of such great deeds and words.

We also find in actual cities children, adolescents, youths, those just taking up family and civic responsibility. Also present in their maturity are those who work and seek to solve problems of need and style, those who rule and are ruled. We have those who step aside to wonder about the meaning of it all, something Socrates thought

1. See James V. Schall, *Roman Catholic Political Philosophy* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004).

should be their first, even daily duty. They ask of *what is*, why it is, why it is this way and not some other way. Those who retire from labor and work also remain in the city. Some are wise. All die.

Cicero says that a republic needs the elderly, the wise, those who have seen the stages of every life, those with experience. The old, patiently or anxiously, expect the final manifestation of their mortality. We have heard that Socrates on his last day spoke of the immortality of his soul to respond to the annoyance of the young potential philosophers who could not understand why he was so calm before such an unfair sentence. We are not just “souls,” but mortals. We do have souls and bodies. They belong together, as Aristotle said. Christianity reaffirmed this with the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Resurrection. The soul is made visible to us when it acts through the body. The relation of immortality to resurrection is the essence of Augustine’s locating the Platonic city not solely in speech but in what he called, modifying but not denying Plato, the City of God.

The ancient cities were said to have been founded by the gods. The rule in those cities was the rule of the gods, as we read in many of Plato’s dialogues. To be a citizen meant to obey the gods of the city. By its liturgies, the city obeyed the gods. The history of mankind is indeed a search for the fit liturgy to praise the gods. That man could rule himself by his own laws was considered an affront to the gods and their measures. The cynics and Epicureans thought that the only way in which man could be happy was to deny the gods that, by their threats of punishment for our ill-deeds, caused us to fear them. Such philosophers and their modern followers preferred nothingness to the gods. Plato did not think this preference of nothingness ended the matter even for the man who preferred it. Plato’s tales tell of a last judgment or determination, lest the world be thought unjust in its constitution.

Man had to steal fire from the gods. The origins of our crafts and arts were often seen to be something taken from the gods, something that even defied them. The gods did not want our indepen-

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dence. Man as man was the being who could challenge the gods. The tales about the gods themselves said that they were wise, even though the gods sometimes scandalized the philosopher who sought justice. Men were not gods, though some of their rulers sought to divinize themselves, the better to rule a disordered people. The gods did not philosophize. The gods knew; they did not merely seek to know. Only men philosophized. Their lives and politics defined by a continual “seeking to know” the order of things.

If all that we knew were simply something granted to us by the gods, the knowledge would be alienating. It violated our nature to be subject to what is not ourselves. We did not exist of ourselves if we existed by the gods. We had nothing of our own. To be men we had to defy the gods. Those who did so were called brave. They then discovered, however, that, once liberated, they were asked to do what they claimed the gods did not do for men. They tried to do this through politics and technology. In our time, we call their attempt to establish the Kingdom of God on earth “modernity.” The human world is to contain nothing but the human world. Even the world of nature is merely a reflection of man’s science. What now exists in the world is only what men allow to exist.

Modernity is conceived as an answer to the gods, to their “allowing” the world of men to be so bad. This answer is aided and abetted by what came to be called science. Indeed, the “modern project,” as Strauss called it, is seen to be a judgment on the gods. With no judgment of God to fear or appeal to, we are left with the judgment of men, often the most powerful of men, as Machiavelli and Hobbes taught us. The gods failed us. The logic is clear. It is said that because the gods ruled, men do not prosper. They do not prosper because man devotes himself to the gods, not to himself and his needs. He wastes his time with prayers and sacrifices to the gods.

The rule of the gods was thus said to include the evil things that happened among men. A god who could not prevent such evils from happening is judged to be a defective god. God, as Benedict ob-

served in *Spe Salvi*, is thus “judged” by modern philosophers to be Himself morally defective (par. 42). To right our ills, we could not turn to a god who allowed such terrible things. We had to find a new purpose within the world, perhaps just in saving the world itself so that our kind would go on and on down the ages, creating a kind of inner-worldly paradise.²

Moderns are, so they tell us, horrified by the “injustice” of it all. They are perplexed by the reoccurrence of the effects of original sin over the centuries, even in their own movements—consider Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*. Readers of Plato are more sober. In book nine of the *Laws*, we read of the “general weakness of human nature” (854a), an ancient caution that would restrain us in our optimism that the ultimate problem lies in some place other than ourselves. Men claim the power to stop such consequences with a theoretical knowledge of how to do so now put into practice. They identify the cause of evil and seek to remove it by reconstructing man or society or the world.

Two responses are possible in the face of this supposedly terrible world God is said to have created: a return to the ancient gods, whether in the East or in Islam—a return to abject and fearful submission to God’s punishment—or a removal by revolutionary means of any sign of God that is claimed to be in the actual world. This approach insisted on an aggressive and violent removal of the identified causes of belief in God, usually found in religion, property, family, or state. This change will be accomplished in the name of man. Humanism will replace piety. Man will replace God with himself. Evidently, once this shift is accomplished, all will finally be well. We will proceed to set up a “Kingdom of God on earth,” a project inspired initially by Kant as the inner-worldly end of history. Progress replaced salvation history, but sought to do the same thing in a strictly human mode.

On December 3, 1764, James Boswell, the Scottish lawyer and biographer, visited Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Môtiers. The conver-

2. See James V. Schall, “On Sustainability,” *The Catholic Thing*, April 28, 2015.

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sation is animated but playful. Boswell records that Rousseau spoke of “ecclesiastics,” evidently Catholic ecclesiastics. “When one of these gentlemen,” Rousseau wickedly observes, “provides a new explanation of something incomprehensible, leaving it as incomprehensible as before, everyone cries, ‘Here is a great man.’”

Rousseau then protests to Boswell that he (Rousseau) is not the “bear” that people talk about. “Sir, I have no liking for the world,” Rousseau admits. “I live here in a world of fantasies and I cannot tolerate the world as it is. . . . Mankind disgusts me. And my house-keeper tells me that I am in far better humours on a day when I have been alone than on those when I have been in company.”³ Rousseau, of course, is one of the originators of that strand of modernity that rejects both revelation and the actual world. It is this revolutionary sentiment that lies behind the urge to set up a better world as a political act that does not depend either on the experience of how men are or on the instructions of the gods, which we call revelation.

II

When we speak of Rousseau or Marx, or, before them, of Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke, we are looking primarily at intellectual history from our time back to those ideas and theses that made the world, as it has become, a world in which the “fantasies” of the modern philosophers are no longer abstractions. They are now put in place almost unopposed, as if there were no given reality to oppose them. While Rousseau wanted to justify the “chains” of law that would enable us to live alone but in conformity to the law he gave himself, others wanted to change our nature itself. Indeed, Rousseau thought he was finally bringing real man forth. If our present nature does not give us what we think we want, we will change our nature.

3. *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland, 1764*, ed. F. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953), 223–24.

“The [modern] project was meant to satisfy in the most perfect manner the most powerful natural needs of men,” Leo Strauss pointed out, in a penetrating observation:

nature was to be conquered for the sake of man who himself was supposed to possess a nature, an unchangeable nature; the originators of the project took it for granted that philosophy and science are identical. After some time it appeared that the conquest of nature requires the conquest of human nature and hence in the first place the questioning of the un-changeability of human nature: an unchangeable human nature might set absolute limits to progress.⁴

The natural needs of men, that is, food, clothing, shelter, and education, have in principle been met. If they are not present in a society, it is not a scientific or technological problem but a political and moral one that has to do with virtue more than science.

As science progresses, however, human nature is not seen as something to be discovered, as an already given thing open to our intelligence. Man is rather a “not-yet,” a project to be carried out by science. We do not know what he will be or look like, as there can be different “models” of his being. He should be open to all models. His identity and well-being are not questions of virtue and grace. His problems are located not in his will but in his body, the object of science. He needs to be reconfigured and manipulated, ostensibly in the name of progress and the perfecting of man over and above any transcendent origin or end; and that progress he accepts as a given and decides by how he lives.

Though speculators and prophets from Jules Verne to Aldous Huxley, Mary Shelly, and George Orwell caught much of what could happen, that science could produce monsters in pursuing more perfect types, it was not until the further advances of the biological sciences that such projects could become something more than mere fantasy or speculation. Experiments with birth control at the begin-

4. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 7.

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ning of life and death control at its end have led, when spelled out, to decline in populations, to begetting children outside of marriage, if not outside the womb, to definitions of marriage and family that have nothing to do with the man-woman-and-child source that was classically understood as normative. Practically all of this experimentation was pursued in the name of progress, of promoting the human good in a manner that would bypass notions of good and evil, of free will and prudence.

It is tempting to maintain that our age is a “Platonic” age in the sense that it is an attempt to put into effect in a new way the essential proposals about the communality of wives, children, and property found in book five of the *Republic*. The original purpose of these proposals was to get at the root cause for disorder in the polity. These causes turned out to be the family itself. But to eliminate the family, we had also to eliminate private property and love itself between specific parents and their children. We were trying to remove greed and envy from the guardians’ education. Children were to be begotten as thoroughbreds, by what we would call today genetic engineering. We try to mate the best with the best for political purposes.

The children are not to know their parents or siblings but are to be brought up in what looks very much like day-care centers, under government laws and officials. Getting governmental control of children at the earliest possible age is one of the keys to this “improvement.” Defective children were to be left to die of exposure or otherwise destroyed. Children not begotten according to the laws of the state were under impediments. The love of spouses and children has no relation to the polity. It is in principle sterile, insignificant, not the origin of new being.

Ironically, Christianity, looking back at these famous proposals, understood that Plato had a point. His means to achieve his end, the formation of leaders who could sacrifice themselves for the common good, were at fault. An alternative means of achieving the same end was developed in the monastic tradition. Following Christ’s admoni-

tion to the rich young man, as we saw earlier, he was to give up his riches and follow Christ. The family and its personal relations were not destroyed but remained as one source of happiness and children. Certain individuals voluntarily gave up ties to family to sacrifice themselves for the good of the community and worship of God, thus avoiding the horrors of the Platonic suggestions of state-engineered, non-erotic modes of begetting. These latter, in a much more sophisticated form, are now among us in the form of in vitro fertilization, homosexual adoptions, cloning, state care of children, and other modes of control of the family.

In his *Laws*, however, Plato had a different picture of begetting. Indeed, it is substantially the same as the Church teaches:

I know of a way to put into effect this law of ours which permits the sexual act only for its natural purpose, procreation, and forbids not only homosexual relations, in which the human race is deliberately murdered, but also the sowing of seeds on rocks and stone, where it will never take root and mature into a new individual; and we should also have to keep away from any female 'soil' in which we'd be sorry to have the seed develop. At present the law is effective only against intercourse between parent and child, but it can be put on a permanent footing and made to apply effectively, as it deserves to, in other cases as well; it'll do a power of good. The first point in its favor is that it is a natural law. (838e–39a)

Most of the issues are already here—illegitimacy, divorce, masturbation, homosexuality, and even the decline of population. These understandings of marriage and its reaches are interestingly called “the natural law.”

III

In the beginning of this chapter, I quoted a passage from C. S. Lewis in which he told us that we did not need a map of a thing if what we were looking for was already before us. When we arrived at where we were going, the directing map (today the GPS) was to be

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replaced by the direct vision of the thing we were searching for. I have entitled this chapter “the definitive kingdom.” The reason for this title is to remind us not to confuse the vision of reality with one that is a poor imitation of it. A good map, of course, as Lewis indicates, should get us to where we are going. Our time in this world is initially given to us to find the right map, the one that directs us to our real end. Even faulty maps lead us to somewhere. When we get to where we are going, we want to be sure that it is where we really want to be. Is it that which is designed to be our end, designed to be something we can gaze on as beautiful, as that which is designed to complete our being?

One of the purposes of revelation is to explain to us what it is we are created for. The Church within revelation was also in part erected to keep the right way before us and to tell us that the wrong ways will not lead us there. If it were not possible for us to take the wrong road to the end for which we are created, there would be no sense in having a map. Indeed, there would be no sense in existing in the first place, for we would reach our end automatically without any input of our own.

The most important intellectual task in the world today is a return to the normalcy of normal things. Modern philosophy has been an endeavor to locate the perfect city within this world. In so doing, it has distorted our understanding of ourselves, of our death, of our end, of our sins, and of our very being. The dynamism of modern philosophy and politics has been itself grounded in the Christian notions of eternal life, salvation history, hope, and justice—only now seen as a this-worldly project.

The charge against God was that He was an unjust God for allowing us to exist as free beings that, by our choices, could cause evil and suffering to ourselves and others. Since God could, supposedly, have arranged a world in which such a dire situation did not happen, therefore, we can justly accuse God of injustice and hence of not being God. Now there is no doubt that God need not have created this

world, so that it does exist by his foresight and choice. It is also true that, once it was created, there have been innumerable disorders within it. God did permit these evils to happen. The question is, was He unjust in doing so?

The answer seems to be “yes” if no greater good was served by permitting the evils. What is the ultimate source of the evils? Evidently, it lies in the existence of a good and rational being who can act and who is in fact responsible for his actions. Put another way, God would not have created a world at all unless the purpose of His creation were to invite free persons to return to Him. That is, for its completion, the world needed to contain within it a creature that could freely choose God. God did not create because He was lonely, as Aristotle suspected. God was not in His inner being lonely. He was in fact a Trinity of Persons in one being. He was complete. The reason for His creation in this sense was not Himself, for He was complete without creation. He created because of the superabundance of the good itself. Creation existed not from justice but of love. God was not constrained to create, so what was created does not primarily manifest justice, though it includes it.

Let me now go back to the question of the accusation against God that He was unjust. In *Spe Salvi*, Benedict directly confronts this issue. He does so, strikingly enough, through the resurrection of the body. And he arrives at this philosophic position not from reading Christian thought but by reading atheist thought. Atheists are often deeply concerned with the injustices in the world. Part of the reason for this is that the origins of modern atheism were laid in a progressive utopianism that in fact produced what Benedict called several political hells on earth. This terrible history should not overly surprise a Christian thinker who knows of original sin and the reflections of Augustine. But it does present an agonizing problem for a man who wants to be able to establish justice in the world and who is willing to admit the terrible history of utopianism.

The problem is multiplied for the atheist, because he under-

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stands quite clearly, as Plato did, that without the immortality of the soul, and hence an ultimate retribution for the injustices in the world, we would have to conclude that reality is incoherent. But Benedict is not just a Platonist, nor are modern atheists. It is the modern atheist who sees that if there is to be a righting of the actual injustices in the world, there has to be a resurrection of the body, a position that their philosophy prevents them from holding and their logic prevents them from denying. Thus, they find themselves living in an intellectual conflict of soul, the kind that can lead to madness or to the “eat, drink, and be merry” tradition of a meaningless life.

What the atheist has done, in other words, is prove—and this is what is important for us—that the resurrection of the body is not just a kind of happy hope or a pious illusion. Rather it has solid intellectual support in clear thinking about a “what is?” question: the question, “what is justice?” The solution to the problem of injustice has two levels. The first is the possibility that the doer of injustice will repent. The second is the existence of hell and punishment for what is not repented. In between, as the pope wisely argues, there is also room for purgatory; this realization comes from a commonsense analysis of the status of degrees of sorrow and repentance. But the essential point is that the actual persons who are responsible for the disorders must be the ones to be punished.

One final and rather amazing addition follows in this line of thinking. The Christian understanding of the resurrection of the body is a consequence of its understanding of who is first raised from the dead, namely, Christ, true God and true man. We tend at first to think that the crimes in the world that so worry all of us, including the atheist, are only human problems, to be solved by human means alone. The Christian for his part would be the first to admit that the resurrection of the dead, as such, is impossible. In spite of modern theories about freezing the dead or other variants of reincarnation, there is in the natural order no resurrection of the

dead. Transhumanism, itself based on a realization of the failure of corporate salvation down the ages, rejects “resurrection” but strives “scientifically” to postpone or eliminate the individual person’s death. When looked at squarely, this solution is a kind of despair.

Of course, the Christian view is that there never was a purely natural order, so that no human being was ever intended to die. Death came into the world because of sin, a free act of a free creature pursuing his end. The devil told Eve that she would be like a god, knowing good and evil—that is, defining them. She would not die. The devil told her that when God had said that she would die, something that she did not yet experience, He had lied. But it turned out that it was not God who was the liar. Adam and Eve do die. We follow their lives. In order to be saved we must link our sins with both a source of forgiveness, something beyond justice but including it, and something beyond death but including it.

We can best understand the resurrection of the dead in relation to the modern atheist’s seeing that it is necessary in the light of his certainty that modern thought is a pursuit of justice. This is why Benedict says that “I am convinced that the question of justice constitutes the essential argument, or in any case the strongest argument, in favor of faith in eternal life” (*Spe Salvi*, par. 43). Notice here that Benedict is not talking about the “fact” of the resurrection, but the grounds for its intelligibility. Before we can talk about the fact of the resurrection, we must arrive at a notion of God that includes the suffering and death of someone who has overcome them. Without this grounding in fact, there is not much sense in speculating about the reality of resurrection.

I call justice “the most terrible virtue” because in principle it has nothing to do with love. It does not directly deal with the person to whom something is due, but deals with persons’ relations to each other.⁵ Justice by itself does not call for mercy. This would suggest,

5. See James V. Schall, “Justice: The Most Terrible Virtue,” *Markets and Morals* 7 (Fall 2004): 409–21.

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as creation itself does, that something more than justice is involved in the affair of redemption. Plato gives a description in the *Phaedo* of the final punishment of those who have done evil (113d–14b). The Platonic imagery is cast in the assumption of an eternal return, itself a theory rising out of a need to restore justice.

The incident in the *Phaedo* describes someone, after death, being punished for a murder. I am thinking of this incident in the context of Benedict's perceptive remark that "Evildoers, in the end, do not sit at the eternal banquet beside their victims without distinctions, as though nothing had happened" (*Spe Salvi*, par. 44). Benedict even cites a passage from the *Gorgias* of Plato at this point (525a–26c) about standing naked before the judge with only our actual life record before us. In the *Phaedo*, the man who committed murder is thrown into a river that flows through hell and back out again, in a circle. He is being punished, and he must remain in the river, going round and round, until he comes by the man whom he killed, who is sitting on the shore. The murderer's punishment will go on until the man he killed forgives him. If he does not forgive him, he will continue his bootless rounds as a consequence of his crime.

What is fascinating about this passage from our point of view is that it is assumed that a crime can be ultimately forgiven by the one against whom the crime is committed. What this leaves aside, of course, is whether a sin or crime is not also against the origin of the other such that it is not merely a matter of a human power. Second, the passage does not deal with the question of the man, even in Hades, who does not forgive. In the context of the relation of justice and resurrection, it is quite striking that the sacrificial death of Christ is presented as atonement for all sins, those forgiven and those not forgiven. Human sinners must still forgive their enemies, but the ultimate atonement includes the resurrection of the body and the judgment of precisely the sins or evils that Theodor Adorno worried about. Adorno was a Marxist philosopher who recognized that since we sinned with our whole being, it was not enough to pun-

ish the soul. Therefore he saw the logic of the resurrection of the body as necessary.

Benedict speaks of the well-known German Marxist philosopher Max Horkheimer. God, in Horkheimer's view, was so wholly other that humans could have nothing to do with either God or resurrection. In response, the pope repeats what he hinted at when he spoke of analogy in his Regensburg Lecture. God cannot be conceived as so totally "other" that nothing can relate us with Him in the order of either grace or reason (*Spe Salvi*, par. 43). God is not completely other, and God must be involved in the forgiveness of sin, thus there is an intellectual need for a final, divine judgment. Eternal life requires that all aspects of justice be met. God in being merciful is also just. This final judgment is what stabilizes this world and assures that we do not escape our crimes by death into nothingness, as Plato worried about.⁶ It also provides the possibility of justice being done to the people who were responsible for the wrong.

The injustice that the atheist sees thus allows of another response that, at the same time, saves both the order of the world and justice without assuming that man alone can by his own powers resolve transcendent ills.

The judgment of God is hope, both because it is justice and because it is grace. If it were merely grace, making all earthly things cease to matter, God would still owe us an answer to the question about justice—the crucial question that we ask of history and of God. If it were merely justice, in the end it could bring only fear to us all. The incarnation of God in Christ has so closely linked the two together—judgment and grace—that justice is firmly established. . . . grace allows us to hope and to go trustfully to meet the Judge whom we know as our "Advocate" (*Spe Salvi*, par. 47).

The order of grace does not eliminate the order of justice. The order of justice does not eliminate the order of grace. The order of

6. See James V. Schall, "The Judgment of God," *Ignatius Insight*, February 18, 2008, www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2008/schall

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grace retains the order of freedom and intelligibility. The “definitive kingdom” does have a location, but it is not in this world. Or to reverse the image, if the “definitive kingdom” is claimed in this world, we can be certain it is not the “definitive kingdom.”

THE UNIVERSE WE THINK IN

Nature, or a god, has given human beings a mind as their outstanding possession.

—Cicero, *On Old Age*, #4

The Lord does whatever he wills, / in heaven, on earth, in the seas. / He summons the clouds from the ends of the earth; / making lightning produce the rain; / from his treasures he sends forth the wind.

—Psalm 135:6–7

I

Socrates was fond of repeating the advice of the Oracle: “Know thyself.” He probably said, “Know thyself,” rather than, “Know the world,” because it was more difficult to know oneself than to know the world. Introspection, however, initially yields knowledge not of

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ourselves but of something approaching infinity beyond ourselves in the sundry things *that are*. We know that we exist only when we first know that something else exists. We are not the direct objects of our own knowing powers. The first conscious thing that we know about ourselves is that we know something else besides ourselves: we have a faculty that can reflect back on itself. In so doing, we realize that we have a power to know. Without this capacity to know, we could not be consciously dealing with ourselves or anything else.

Yet, we did not give this strange knowing power to ourselves. We merely discovered it already existing and operative in ourselves through no contribution of our own. We were already using it before we realized that we had it. We can wonder perhaps, "Why do we have it?" We do not, most of us, doubt that we do have it, though some few do think it all might be an illusion. But this very suspicion of illusion is already an indication that we see a distinction between what an illusion is and what it is not.

Plato, recall, thought that the universe is not complete unless within it something exists that can understand it. I am more than intrigued by this view. It is almost as if the universe, being itself "spoken," needs to be listened to and spoken back to someone. We need to rearticulate what the universe is to some knowing power that is not ourselves. Such a view presupposes that within the universe itself is found an intelligibility that makes this specific universe to be what it is rather than some other world configuration that may also be possible. This intrinsic intelligibility of the world is not put there by the human mind but is found by it to be already there. When all is sorted out, this world seems coherent, however long and laborious the process of that discovery may be.

In our intellectual comprehension of things, we stand, as it were, outside the ongoing complexity of what the universe is. Yet, as existing beings within it, we clearly also belong to the universe. We human beings may be an anomaly, but we are here with as much title as any other being in the universe including the universe itself. We

do not much worry that this cosmos need not be as it is, that it might have been configured differently. We find intelligibility in the universe; we do not put it there. The fact that we can speak of a “drama” of the universe implies that it reveals a plot of some kind. We wonder what sort of evidence there might be for its meaning.

As Christians, we have an explanation of the universe and our place within it. It comes to us, it would seem, on good authority: the authority of God. We can look on and understand this explanation as it is revealed to us even if we do not “believe” it. When we have ferreted out this overall plan, we can also, using our minds, ask whether it fits in with what we can know and figure out by ourselves through our science and intuition. The first thing to recognize is that the universe, the cosmos, what is called in Genesis “the heavens and the earth,” need not exist at all. God is not “part” of creation. He stands outside of it. He does not need it unless He so wills. The universe depends on Him; He does not depend on it. Aristotle once hinted that the world existed because God was lonely, that He lacked what is best in us, namely, the relation to and friendship with others. Thus, in this view, the world exists because God lacked something. If this position were true, God would be less than God.

But creation does not teach any dependency of God on the world. It teaches the opposite. God is not lonely. Still, Aristotle had reason for thinking as he did.¹ What he lacked was an understanding of the inner life of God, something not naturally known except to the Godhead itself. Many things in Aristotle are right about God. His God even seems to have some care for the world. His God does move also by love and desire as a final cause. But it was only the doctrine of the Trinity that fully explained the sense of Aristotle’s concern. If there is love and inner friendship within God, then He would have no need to create to make up a deficiency. It does not follow from this position, however, that God lacked a reason to create, or that He did

1. See Marie George, “Would Aristotle Agree with St. John That God Is Love?,” *Aquinas Review* 16 (2010): 1–43.

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not create out of love. It only means that He did not create out of an inner necessity of His own, out of some divine lack.²

When it comes to the making of things, the first philosophical principle is that the first thing in intention is the last thing in execution. Moreover, the last thing in execution indicates the reason for creation in the first place. What I am concerned about in this book, as we have seen, is the overall structure of the universe. But this “structure,” as it were, is itself dependent on why it exists in the first place. Cicero said our distinguishing characteristic is reason, whatever its source; I would go further to say that this faculty of our soul must be fully activated for the universe to be complete.

Christianity would not disagree with this view. It would add that reason is open also to what is revealed to it from the source of reason itself, should that origin choose to make something of itself knowable. Evidently, all beings with reason in their nature can communicate with each other at some level. Revelation is mind speaking to mind. Revelation is not primarily intended to confuse man but to enlighten him about *what is*. It does this enlightening in a peculiar way. Revelation comes to us more fully through redemption than through creation, though something of it comes through each way. Creation already sets forth the grounds whereby redemption might be necessary if the initial purpose of God in creation is to be attained in spite of some human failure.

II

The cosmos itself, it appears, came into being, with time and space, between thirteen and fourteen billion years ago. In one sense, this beginning seems like a long time ago. In another sense, it is a finite period, not an infinite one. Some earlier theories of cosmic origin wanted to maintain that the cosmos was chronologically in-

2. See Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

finite, which would allow for infinite possible configurations of the cosmos, including the world as we know it. The evidence seems now clear, as scientists constantly review the collected evidence, that the cosmos began with what is called a “big bang,” in which everything in its physical structure is present in principle. The most plausible explanation of the evidence and fact of this cosmic order is the existence of a super-intelligence outside the universe.

What is remarkable about this beginning is that it could not have originated from “nothing.” Nothing means no reality is present. The cosmos betrays an order that was present at its beginning. It could not give itself this order. It must have been already present in reality. This order necessarily implies mind: the origin of the cosmos must have been with an all-knowing being that understood the structure of the world and placed its order within it to be worked out in space and time. The world contains beings that can act in various ways, including rational ways. God may be the only explanation for why existing being remains present at all times. This fact does not prevent our knowing that, within the cosmos, we find other beings who exercise their own relative autonomy and power.

Secondary causes are found in the world as it exists. A secondary cause means a being who is not God can actually do certain things, either by instinct or through the use of an intelligence and will. Time and place are real, not just figments of our imagination. God is powerful enough that He creates beings that can also be free and act in their own right. His dealings with them will be after the manner of their own being and natural powers. Indeed, this fact of the actual existence of free and intelligent beings who are not gods brings us to the purpose of creation in the first place. It indicates thus the reason why the cosmos exists in both its simplicity and complexity, in its size and grandeur as in the tiniest and smallest things found in creation.

Aquinas tells us that the eternal law is the order of things outside of God as they exist initially or eternally in the mind of God. God can

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create “images” of Himself outside of Himself. These images, these persons, are created for their own sakes, but likewise as beings that are offered something beyond the powers of their own nature. This is why C. S. Lewis once said that we have never met a mere mortal. And indeed, we have never met a mere “immortal” either. What we have met are individual human persons, each unique, each created freely as a whole substance, in order that each might freely accept the participation offered to him to live, after his fashion, the inner life of the Godhead, eternal life.

The cosmos exists so that an arena to carry out this purpose might be spread out in space and in time. Looked at from this angle, the cosmos, while majestic in itself, bears nowhere near the fascination that is manifest and carried out in the “three score years and ten” that are figuratively given to each person. And yet, what we now call the salvation of each person takes place within a world that we seek to understand and order, that we seek to know. In studying the cosmos, what seems now clear is that it did not cause itself, nor did it come about by accident from nothing. The notion that “nothing” can have an accident is both amusing and incoherent.

In addition, the cosmos seems to bear clear signs that its structure was so ordered that rational life would be possible at some place or some places in the universe. The various constants that allow the anthropic principles that make life possible and keep it in being in the universe seem much too finely honed to be mere accidents. They reveal, rather, purpose already within the structure of the cosmos from its beginning. The cosmos exists so that free and rational beings might exist to carry out their own purposes, the most important of which is their final relation to the source from and in which they originated.

From this background, it follows that what is important about the cosmos is not so much its existence as its grounding of human life for sufficient time so that humanity might, in all its manifold individual forms, decide what it is about in its existence. Neither the cosmos nor human persons are designed to go on forever in their

present forms. Evidently, this personal account of what one wills through his thoughts and actions applies to each individual member of the rational race insofar as he is related also to others of his kind. But, as we know on the basis of Christ's own Resurrection, the cosmos does not simply end when its initial purpose is achieved in the redemption of our souls and bodies, for creation itself awaits redemption also (Rom 8:19–21).

So I have called this final chapter, “the universe we think in.” It is in this world, this universe, that we are given the powers to know what we are and why we exist. This cosmos is also the arena of our working out how we will stand to our salvation, to its purpose and its origin. We are given from within the universe even the Incarnation of the Son of God not merely for the redemption of our sins but for the completion of the work of the Father in the beginning. It is sometimes astonishing to realize how little evidence for atheism there really is. But it is equally astonishing to realize how much evidence for pride exists among us, for the effort to create our own world apart from the world that is really there for us to know.

We can be sure, in the end, that if, as Psalm 115:3 says, “the Lord does whatever He wills,” He never wills to complete His initial purpose in offering us eternal life by force or determinism. Human beings have to be willing to receive it, or they cannot possess it. Perhaps this purpose has something to do with the length of time and the immensity of space what we now look out on and back into. The Lord not only “summons the clouds from the ends of the earth” (Psalm 135). He calls upon us to wonder about the ends of this earth and of our place within it.

This universe is shot through with will and intelligence, order and chance, limitations and vastness. Each person exists to know what this cosmos is about and to achieve for himself through his life with others the initial purpose for which it exists in the first place—namely, to associate other finite and free beings with one another in the inner life of the Trinitarian Godhead.

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“Why do I exist?” Recall finally Pascal’s concern, quoted at the beginning of the preface—Why is my life limited to one hundred and not a thousand years? We are, each of us, given all the time we need in “a place on the earth”—to cite one of Wendell Berry’s titles. Here we think out how things are and what it is that we choose to be. We decide what it is that we will accept as our own meaning—what we make ourselves to be or what we accept as the gift of eternal life. This account is what constitutes the basic meaning of the universe we think in.

Conclusion

“IN THIS SMALL COURSE”

Let that light be thy guide / *In this small course* which birth draws out unto death, / And think how evil becometh him to slide, / Who seeketh heav'n, and comes of heav'nly breath. / Then farewell, world; / thy uttermost I see; / Eternal Love, maintain thy life in me.

—Sir Philip Sidney, “Leave Me, O Love”

The Introduction of this book, to recall again, began with Pascal's query about why we do not live a thousand years rather than a hundred or less. We will conclude by touching on the classical theme, often found in the poets and the Psalms, about the seeming shortness of the days meant for a mankind created for glory. The “course” of our lives which “birth draws out unto death,” as Sydney put it, is indeed the summary of these pages. Even those who seek evil do so because they are pursuing a good, but in their own way. We seek the transcendent end of our personal being. We cannot avoid doing so even if we deny that any such transcendent end can be found. For

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that denial is a statement of what we consider the end to be. Even the most pessimistic of men want their pessimism to be known and marveled at as true. Why else would they tell us about it?

The prodding that we often feel in our souls to know what we are, to know *what is*, comes, as Augustine said, from God, from our very origin. That prodding goes with the being we are given to be. We cannot avoid it. We really ought not to try to avoid it. We do not maintain our lives in existence, even when we meticulously take care of our health. The divine life that is offered to us is itself maintained in us through grace. Sydney's short poem is a thinking about the world. We are to "think" about evil. Farewell, world. This world is our "home," yet we are only passing strangers. It is not our true home. This universe we think in tells us at least that we have here no lasting city. But it also tells us that we are here, in a given time and place, for the span of our days, to work out what we are to be when they end.

At the same time, while living on it, we experience a nostalgia and love of this Earth, this green earth, even for its inner-worldly improvement and completion that result from human enterprise, work, and care. In *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II's Constitution on the Church, we read: "We do not know the time when the earth and humanity will reach their completion, nor do we know the way in which the universe is transformed. The world, as we see it, disfigured by sin, is passing away. But we are assured that God is preparing a new dwelling place and a new earth" (par. 39). We hear familiar echoes here. The earth and humanity will reach their "completion." Death is to be "overcome." We hear of a "new dwelling place" as if we belong in a place that we will finally recognize when we see it. The completion will come in time, at the end. It will come as a surprise, yet as something totally consistent with and explanatory of what we have been told and how, at our best, we think.

At first sight, this approach will seem but another form of utopia, which we have been at pains in these pages to reject as the prop-

er way to see *what is*. What is unique about classical Christianity is the ordering of society to a final end in which “eternal love,” to use Sydney’s phrase, prevails. But as he also insists, this love is not our invention, but it is “maintained” in us. If we could call it down ourselves, it would not be the divine love and grace toward which the universe is pointed through the heart of each of the persons who have ever lived in this world. How many of us have or will have belonged to our species, however vast, is finite. We are not merely a series of passing instants or an abstract collectivity.

In a conversation with a Polish bishop, Pope Francis made the following insightful observation: “I believe that in this highly secularized world, we have the danger of gnostic spiritualization. Secularization makes it possible for us to indulge in a spiritual life which is a little gnostic. . . . It consists in a subjective spirituality, without Christ. For me the biggest problem with secularization is de-Christianization: removing Christ, removing the Son.”¹ Ideology, in this sense, is gnostic.² That is, it is the imposition of an ungrounded theory or idea on reality. It does not draw from *what is* the intelligibility of what is there, of what constitutes the origin and purpose of our being what we are.

The great paradox of our being is that we are more than we can imagine that we are. Our origins are in the transcendent order because, in its light, each of us is created to last forever. How and whether we shall do so is what constitutes the story and drama of each human life, however great, ordinary, or insignificant. We are created to think in this universe in which we find ourselves. The universe is good and it is good to know it. The human effort to understand the world is a noble one, something worthy of beings who are not gods and know that they are not gods. It is not, as such, idolatrous to dis-

1. Pope Francis, “Meeting with Polish Bishops,” Krakow, Poland, *L’Osservatore Romano*, English, August 12, 2016.

2. See Eric Voegelin on Gnosticism in *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), chapters 3 and 4; see also James V. Schall, “The Abiding Significance of Gnosticism,” *American Ecclesiastical Review* (September 1962): 164–73.

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cover what is there, including the logic of what that “there-ness” implies. As I have worked my way through these chapters step by step, what seems clear is the grandeur and glory of our earthly sojourn amidst what can only be called a “fallen world.” It is said by playwrights that if we put Satan on stage, the almost inevitable result is that he will steal the show. But apocalypse, as we have seen, is not ultimately Satan’s show, however much attention he might receive in the meantime.

The proper image of our glory is, as Plato said in the *Laws*, “the singing, dancing, and sacrificing”—the Great Dance that enlivened *Perelandra*, in response to the Father and the Word. This response is not a Gnosticism of our own making. The world is not complete unless beings exist within it that can understand what it is. In this sense, the world is mind seeking mind, being seeking being. The reason why we exist is to be offered more than what we are. Still, if we could not reject this offer, it would not be worth offering it to us. Friendship, even with God, especially with God, has to be free, or it is only a mechanical act worth nothing.³ In this sense, it is not without reason that we often see the following refrain in Christian literature: “Many are called but few are chosen” (Mt 22:14). The risk that God took in creation is real. This is what the Fall was about. Men could reject what they were intended to be.

We recall the rejection of God’s ways by the followers of Moses in the desert (Acts 7:36–40). Likewise, a risk is intrinsic to redemption. God’s merciful initiative to save those who initially rejected Him could be also rejected. Redemption is not determined. This subsequent divine initiative added to the world the suffering of the Word Incarnate, Who became present in the world, amidst all finite existing things. The universe we think in is the universe that includes these rejections and the divine initiatives responding to them. These new realities within the world are essential to an un-

3. See James V. Schall, “Unknown to the Ancients: God and Friendship,” in *What Is God Like?* (Collegeville, Minn.: Glazier/Liturgical, 1992), 140–70.

derstanding of what happens in our world and to an understanding of what each one of us is in our personal existence.

Much has been said in this book about repentance and forgiveness. Sometimes the more ancient Fathers of the Church say it better. Thus, St. John Chrysostom, in his “Homily on the Temptation of the Devil,” tells us: “You too should condemn your own sins; that will be enough reason for the Lord to forgive you, for a man who condemns his own sins is slower to commit them again.”⁴ The notion of “condemning our own sins” means that we must think about our actions and how we consider them. Sins are possible in the world *that is*. But they may not be so called in the world we choose for ourselves. The relation between the world *that is*, the world to which revelation is addressed, and a Gnostic world of our own making is the agonizing issue that we all must face.

Near the end of this book we considered the notion of re-enchantment. It is a good theme with which to complete these concluding reflections. In academia, one must talk about things of reason and revelation quite gingerly. I have tried in this book to speak of them more openly and frankly, as if they belong together—which they do. Once we see why revelation and reason may be related and how, we can speak and write as if the whole truth concerns us—which it obviously does. The notion of re-enchantment, as I see it, is what happens when we realize that the accounts of Scripture about creation and redemption are not “myths” or “tales” that have no empirical groundings. What has happened is that, as Tolkien said, the myths are true. It turns out that both science itself and what David Walsh and others have called “the modern philosophical revolution”⁵ more and more converge on the intimate relation of philosophy and revelation as the truer explanation of the universe we

4. The quote from St. John Chrysostom’s homily is found in *The Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. 4, *Ordinary Time* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975), Tuesday of the twenty-first week in Ordinary Time, second reading, 162.

5. David Walsh, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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think in. The real re-enchantment is precisely an explanation once thought to be a “myth” that turns out to be true.

“Let that light be our guide / *In this small course* which birth draws out unto death; / and think how evil becometh him to slide, / Who seeketh heav’n and comes from heav’nly breath. / Then farewell, World, thy uttermost I see; / Eternal Love, maintain thy life in me.”

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