# Whence Intelligibility?

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# INTRODUCTION

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Nobody will contest that intelligibility is a fundamental philosophical theme, one that has puzzled philosophers since the very beginnings of philosophy. Indeed, the notion of intelligibility stands at the very heart of what philosophy is all about. Plainly stated: would philosophy exist at all if there were no experience of what we call "intelligibility"? Is not that experience the source, the origin of all philosophizing? Since its beginnings, philosophy has indeed been said to owe its existence to the fact that the world is astonishing, amazing. The world of course is not always intelligible and certainly not entirely intelligible. Reality resists in numerous ways our search for intelligibility. From this opposite perspective, one could say that it is our experience of the opacity of the world that triggers the quest for intelligibility. Both sides are intertwined: our experience of the world teaches us that both intelligibility and unintelligibility characterize it at the same time. We both experience intelligibility and its absence. Intelligibility would then be an ambiguous and mixed experience, at the same time positive and negative.

Besides, another duality can be identified. Intelligibility is fundamentally something we experience about and within the world – experience, here, means our sheer encounter with the world, in other words, the fact that existence in its pure facticity is put to the test – an experience that occurs when reality seems to answer, albeit partially, our attempts to shed light on it and our need to understand it. Intelligibility happens, occurs. There is a passive side to the experience of intelligibility. We find ourselves in "intelligibility" like a milieu. The world as our dwelling place makes sense – if not perfectly, at least to some extent. But there is also an active side. In engaging the world, what was encountered first as pure darkness, pure opacity, becomes clearer and more porous. Intelligibility becomes an activity, the outcome of human agency.

Despite the fact that we *do* experience what we call intelligibility – or again, its lack – like all basic philosophical questions, intelligibility is a real conundrum. The experience of intelligibility should always remain an amazing one. We may know on existential grounds what we mean when way say that a reality is intelligible, but that does not mean that we can justify it. Why is the world intelligible? What makes it intelligible? So we need to push that issue further and ask: Why after all should there be intelligibility? Do we have some kind of right to expect intelligibility? Maybe the answer would be easier if there was no such thing as the experience of unintelligibility. If the mere experience of intelligibility can be troubling, what then do we say when we encounter its opposite? It is this mixed and contrasted experience of intelligibility and unintelligibility *at the same time* that captures the challenge raised by intelligibility.

How can we explain the mere presence of intelligibility? What exactly is intelligibility? and unintelligibility? Why is intelligibility experienced with unintelligibility? These are just a sample of questions that come to mind.

This difficulty probably explains why intelligibility is most often approached indirectly and not as an issue in itself. It is a kind of question that seems to escape any direct or simplistic answer. We experience intelligibility or its absence, but when summoned to explain it, we do not know what to say. And still, philosophy could be defined as the quest for intelligibility, and often – even if not essentially – as a struggle against the absence of intelligibility. To inquire about intelligibility, then, amounts to inquiring about what philosophy is all about. In a sense, philosophy can be defined as an attempt to clarify and explain what we experience and speak about as intelligibility, the fundamental experience of intelligibility. This book intends to shed some light upon that experience.

To enquire about intelligibility as such is not an easy task, especially if one wishes to situate oneself in the largest possible perspective, i.e., to adopt a truly philosophical standpoint. The issue is most often approached through a particular philosophical system or school. Indeed, the history of philosophy can be viewed as the exposition of the different interpretations of intelligibility that have been proposed through the ages. Each philosophy is an attempt to elucidate what intelligibility is all about. In other words, beyond the level of extreme generalization, hermeneutical presuppositions are engaged. This introduction is thus itself an interpretation.[1] At the same time, as an introduction to a collection of papers, it stays purposely at a fairly general level. Its aim is to offer a summary of what can be considered as the classical view on intelligibility. I will argue that intelligibility, in Western philosophy, has mainly been understood in three non-contradictory ways: from a "subjective" perspective, as a "natural" capacity to shed light upon the world in which we are embedded; from an "objective" perspective, as a property of the world itself; and finally, from a "second degree" objective perspective, as a property pertaining to the various objectivities produced by reason itself.

Intelligibility is closely linked with meaning and knowledge. A thing is said to be intelligible when we understand it. The traditional metaphor of light is of great help here: to experience intelligibility is to experience enlightenment. The absence of intelligibility is precisely the opposite: the absence of light, the incapacity to illuminate things, a failure to remove obscurity and darkness. Intelligibility is based on a presumption, a kind of rational faith in reality, that the latter will answer positively, that intelligibility is there to be found. In turn, this presumption exists because we do experience some intelligibility in our encounter with the world.

Traditionally, the word "intelligibility" has been used to refer to a certain kind of capacity proper to human being and, jointly, to a property pertaining to reality itself. As a human agency, intelligibility is expressed through words such as intelligence, thought, mind, and reason. Intelligibility

indicates the natural light that human beings find in themselves as rational beings, when they engage in some theoretical enterprise but also when they intervene as rational agents. It is what takes place when we grasp a content that corresponds to intellectual intentionality. Intelligibility refers to the disclosure of meaning. It reveals itself as a capacity to grasp the features of what is to be known, by which the object known becomes intelligible. An object becomes intelligible when we understand it. To understand something is to gain access to the source of intelligibility which precisely reveals the intelligibility of the thing, makes the thing intelligible. The thing becomes intelligible when it shows itself as it is, when it manifests itself as and in itself. When this event happens, an intelligible world, the world of intelligibility, shows itself. This world forms true knowledge or science (*episteme*).

Through intelligibility, reason manifests itself as a power of elucidation that makes reality available to mind. This power brings reality into realm of intelligibility, it reveals reality as intelligibility. Going beyond what is simply given, reason unveils the conditions of the possibility of reality. It goes beyond the sensible and the visible. Reason aims to bring out the conditions of the manifestation of reality. These conditions are the source of intelligibility of this manifestation and what makes understanding possible. This source, from which meaning appears, is the principle. Reason is thus also the capacity to reach principles. It can even be considered as a principle in itself, i.e., be understood as a universal principle of reality. This suggests the aim of achieving a total and universal grasp of the intelligibility of the world. This is true also in the practical realm, where intelligibility appears as the search of a meaningful and justifiable kind of action.

The natural light reveals at the same time an intelligibility pertaining to the world itself. There is intelligibility in the things themselves, inscribed in the world. Reason is always preceded by a gift, a given. Reality is already there when we begin to think about it; reasoning does not create its object in a pure and complete fashion. The intelligibility we experience, then, would be the reception of this intrinsic intelligibility that makes itself manifest. Thus it appears there is some kind of pre-established correspondence between the natural light of mind and the world, to the extent that we may conclude that the light of the mind is nothing else but the light proper to the manifestation of the world as what makes this manifestation possible. Reason echoes the world. This is the miracle and the object of wonder on which philosophy and science are based.

Intelligibility, then, seems to allude *altogether* to a power present in the mind and in the world. In other words, the conceptual network produced by the mind cannot be reduced merely to a pure autonomous creation. There exists something like a rational order that the mind tries to explore and express. This order is the measure to which the mind constantly tries to adjust. In other words, there is a correspondence between the world and the mind. This ontological dimension of intelligibility raises a crucial and difficult question: what exactly constitutes the source of intelligibility?

Where does light come from? What is its exact source? Is intelligibility solely a property of the mind? Such a view would imply that the mind or human subjectivity is the only source of intelligibility. The world, then, would be in itself devoid of any intelligibility. Or is it that the mind only mirrors the intelligibility present in the world? But then the mind would only be like a captor or an amplifier. Or is it a mix of the two? The mind could be, after all, passive and active at the same time. What has been previously understood as a merely external source of illumination could be seen as the projection – at least to some extent – of an internal structure of some sort present in the mind.

At this point, we may introduce the third aspect of intelligibility. The question was soon raised whether the intelligibility found in the things themselves was the real and only true intelligibility, and should then be considered a priori. In that perspective, intelligibility found in the mind would be only the reflection of an objective light. The true and only light would be the intelligibility proper to the ontological (metaphysical) structure of the world. But this intelligibility begs to be brought into public view, literally, to light. It needs at least some minimal cooperation from the human subject. This could be minimally understood as the intervention or the help of human reason as mirror of the light of the world. Ontological intelligibility can be grasped only through some working of reason. The debate, then, is about the length of human intervention, the place and role of subjectivity in knowing. One might think that some kind of rational tool must be introduced in order to make the light embedded in the world appear. A mediating agent seems required. This rational tool is the concept. Intelligibility is a principle in things as well as the representation of it by which – through the concept – the light of things appears. If the role of the concept is acknowledged, then some mediation between reason and the world is needed, and a third component of intelligibility opens up that cannot be simply reduced to the previously noted ones. One can easily recognize here the fundamental debate whether there is an immediate access to the intelligible, a debate that has been initiated by Plato and Aristotle.

The modern period has witnessed a tremendous expansion of this third component. Actually, this component has expanded and transformed itself into a vast, self-constructing objective domain always in expansion. It consists in the numerous and various new forms of rationality that are constructions of meaning of a new domain infinite in scope. This "objective reason" is an historical construct, a web of objective figures. It creates the space that mediates between human reason and the world. It manifests itself as an ever more important reality. Intelligibility here appears more and more as an objective realm, constituted by human agency, distinct from the natural world, but also distinct from the subjective mind from which it originates, as an autonomous world living on its own. This is what modern and contemporary rationality is all about. It is a plural, multi-dimensional world, evolving by itself. It reveals itself with all the possibilities it carries but also with all the queries these possibilities may raise.

When the question of intelligibility is raised, no one can tell in advance where this will eventually lead. If philosophy is all about questioning, no boundary can be ascribed a priori to it. By definition, philosophy is a radical enterprise. One should not then be surprised if the questioning, at a certain period in time, becomes particularly acute and critical. What is known as "postmodernism" may be understood as such an historical moment. If understood in a purely negative way, postmodernism constitutes a radical criticism and, further, a destruction of all classical views of intelligibility to the point of rejecting the very notion of intelligibility. Intelligibility would be simply a chimera that we should abandon for all time. This thesis is not, of course, entirely new, but finds in postmodernism a quite harsh and radical form. The postmodern rebuttal is indeed a sharp criticism of modern philosophy – and, indeed, of the whole Western philosophical tradition. It largely echoes a certain spiritual mood that shapes contemporary culture, due to intellectual, but also (and mostly) to some influential historical events. But it is also the outcome of the very dynamism of the philosophical tradition. Together, they foster the wide movement of criticism that already characterizes "modernity".

While postmodernism certainly entails the possibility that any kind of intelligibility be rejected, a more positive and probably appropriate interpretation sees postmodernism as a legitimate reaction against a naïve and too ambitious understanding of intelligibility, reminding us of the complexity of the world and our own intrinsic rational limitations. It would then serve as a medicine. It is, in a way, just the pursuit of that strange mode of questioning initiated long ago when philosophy was invented. Postmodernism would then be a general and encompassing attempt to raise again that issue in a new and more acute and radical way than ever before. It becomes an opportunity to deepen our questioning and to reopen the question afresh. It would remind us that, after all, intelligibility is everything but an evidence.

I would suggest that the very issue here at stake is historicity. The issue postmodernism raises is about the proper recognition of historicity but also about how to reconcile historicity and truth. Even if one disagrees with its propositions – and there are indeed many good reasons for that – one has still to acknowledge the relevancy of the questions it raises. Postmodernism should be understood as an attempt to foster more appropriate answers to the very nature of intelligibility. Even if postmodernism is not as such addressed in this collection, it should be seen as the horizon to which each contribution should be related.

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All these issues find room, in one way or another, in the various contributions found in this book which is divided into four main parts.

**THEORETICAL REASON**

As mentioned earlier, the issue of intelligibility is closely related to theoretical reason. It is surely appropriate to open this collection with a contribution that reminds us of the classic understanding of intelligibility, i.e., as identification and grasp of a form. More specifically, Robbie Moser's paper, "Wittgenstein, Form, and the Criterion of Understanding" (**Chapter I**), focuses on a traditional view that understanding is attendant upon reception of intelligible form and must then be understood as a mental event. Obviously, this view has had tremendous importance and longevity in the history of Western philosophy. This is confirmed by a confrontation with Wittgenstein, from which Moser concludes that both views – the traditional and the Wittgensteinian – are closer than what is generally held. Moser's paper ends on a theological note, reminding us of the importance God has played traditionally in relation to intelligibility as the foundation or the ultimate condition of possibility of intelligibility itself. In **Chapter II**, Leslie Armour ("Explanation, Principle, & the Idea of God"), restates this view in a contemporary fashion and from an analytical perspective. According to Armour, the assertion that God is the ultimate explanation for both the existence and the present state of the world involves two claims: (1) "Everything other than God can be explained by reference to God", and (2) "no explanation for the existence of God needs to be or can be offered". More specifically, he argues "that these claims can be sustained if and only if two conditions, one negative and one positive, are fulfilled: (1) God is not to be regarded as an individuated entity whose description figures amongst the descriptions of factual states of affairs in the universe, and (2) the existence of God is to be regarded as a matter of principle." Modern notions of dialectics, evolution and process are, in turn, introduced by Elizabeth Trott (**Chapter III**, "Intelligibility, Metaphor, and Conceptual Transfiguration"). She brings into the discussion the modern historical approach of intelligibility, which is understood as an evolving process of constant changes and adaptations, resulting in the discovery of new meanings. Art and the concept of metaphor play an important role here. This intervention of the metaphoric level ties in with an important aspect of the current discussion on intelligibility that tries to revisit and reinterpret the traditional understanding that is formulated in terms of concepts. Human agency, too, becomes a fundamental issue in this view, meaning being understood as a creation that constantly transfigures the world.

**PRACTICAL REASON**

We now come to the second main domain where intelligibility is involved, namely practical reason. In this case, intelligibility is understood in terms of the justification of ethical norms. An answer to that problem has been the search for an objective basis for ethical normativity. In the Thomistic tradition, this objectivity has been closely associated with the notion of

natural law. In **Chapter IV**, "Maritain, Aquinas, and the Intelligibility of the Natural Law", which confronts Aquinas and Maritain on how natural law is known to us, David J. Klassen argues that Maritain is mistaken when he interprets St. Thomas Aquinas as saying that the natural law is known by connaturality through affective and volitional inclinations which guide and direct reason. There is indeed, according to Aquinas, such a thing as knowledge of the natural law through inclination by which human beings are ordered to an end connatural to them; but that inclination is first and foremost the inclination of reason itself, where reason is said to contain the first and universal principles of the natural law. Beyond this debate occurring within the Thomistic tradition, we easily recognize here a crucial problem raised by the question of intelligibility itself, not only in ethics but on a theoretical level as well: is knowledge a matter of intuition or of conceptualization? This question introduces a fundamental debate that has taken place from the very beginnings of Western philosophy and continues up to recent times. Sheila Mason tackles the same issue in **Chapter V** ("Moral Intelligibility and the Social Imaginary"), but from a different angle. Narrativity and virtue theory build the framework in which she makes sense of intelligibility in the moral domain. She pleas for a new emergent sensibility based on virtue theory, and this as a way to create a new social imaginary (see Charles Taylor's work). She is, at the same time, quite critical about modernity, a feature we will find again in the papers collected in the next section.

**MODERN REASON AND ITS CHALLENGES**

Modernity, as noticed before, played a crucial role in introducing the kind of intelligibility that today's science fosters. Louis Groarke, in **Chapter VI** ("Intelligibility versus Proof: Philosophical Method in Pascal and Descartes"), suggests that Pascal's view of intelligibility and understanding, as captured in the famous word, "coeur," offers a viable counterpart to Descartes' dominant epistemological model – a non-reductivist epistemological framework. This rehabilitation is at the same time a robust criticism of the modern acceptance of intelligibility as rational justification and of modern epistemology as a whole. This interrogation about the conditions of intelligibility in modernity and its meaning in contemporary contexts finds an echo in David Lea's contribution (**Chapter VII**, "Modernity and Intelligibility: A Comparison of the Interpretations of René Guénon and Jacques Maritain"), which consists primarily in a comparison between Maritain and Guénon's respective criticisms of modernity. Lea bluntly asks whether modernity and the period many now call post-modernity actually represent advances in intelligibility and rational understanding in comparison with these earlier traditions. Some, like Groarke, argue in fact that modernity and so-called post-modernity, together with the scientific world view, mark a decline in overall intelligibility. Whatever side one takes in this discussion, the discussion itself signals the

huge modifications introduced by modernity as one of the key issues that any account of intelligibility must face today.

## SPECIFIC AREAS OF INTELLIGIBILITY: KNOWING GOD AND THE HUMAN PERSON

Besides raising questions about the general conditions of intelligibility, philosophers over the centuries have also been interested in specifying these conditions in regards to certain more particular areas of interest. The question of God certainly stands among these areas that have been the most studied in this regard. Roughly put, the question states: how is it possible to know God? In **Chapter VIII** ("Maritain and Intellectual Mysticism"), David C. Bellusci reopens the debate by examining the issue of intellectual mysticism in the work of Jacques Maritain. Bellusci claims that Maritain's pre-philosophical and famous sixth way contains idealistic elements. This approach was certainly a way for Maritain to adapt Aquinas' five ways to the contemporary context by bringing into the picture some more "anthropological," even "subjective," elements into the picture. But Maritain's insistence on the notion of intuition not only brings forward once again the debate between intuition and concept – which we see in David Klassen's discussion in the present volume – but opens up the issue of the possibility and the nature of knowledge of God. Knowledge of human beings, of persons and, more generally, the whole issue of intersubjectivity, has been raised as such by modern and contemporary philosophers. Among them stands the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, whose key notion of intersubjectivity is the topic of Nikolaj Zunic's contribution to this volume (**Chapter IX**, "The Mystery of Intersubjectivity"). In Marcel's view, the "mystery of subjectivity" constitutes a specific area of intelligibility that cannot be approached through the standard methods of scientific reason. The modern conception of intelligibility comes under attack once again as being too narrow and objectivist.

To conclude, in **Chapter X** ("Is the "Intelligibility of Religious Language" Debate Dead?"), William Sweet revisits the issue regarding the intelligibility of propositions expressing religious belief. Though it may seem that little consideration has been given to this issue of late, Sweet notes that the issue is far from dead. He first reviews some philosophical responses of the mid and late 20th century to the question whether propositions expressing religious belief can be said to be intelligible. He then argues that there are resources, in contemporary philosophy of religion, to advance this debate, and to provide an explanation of how religious language is intelligible. More specifically, Sweet suggests that the accusation that propositions or 'systems' of religious belief are, in general, unintelligible, seems to be based on a failure to recognize the complexity of religious belief and religious beliefs. In order to defend the intelligibility of religious belief, one needs to be attentive to religious belief (and religious beliefs) as having both a descriptive and an expressive character.

This collection, then, leaves the reader with two questions of the utmost importance. First, how can a dialogue be achieved between pre-modern and modern essentialist views about intelligibility? Second, how can modern developments in the understanding of reason be integrated into a more encompassing view of rationality? Indeed, these two questions weave into one: how can we today remain faithful to the notion of reason that we have inherited from the beginnings of Western philosophy? In order to remain faithful to the scope of the initial understanding of reason as a fundamental project for humanity, to abide by its requirements, we must reassess the very notions of reason and intelligibility. This task lies at the heart of contemporary philosophy, a task to which this volume would like to bring a modest contribution.[2]

## NOTES

[1] I wish to acknowledge my debt to the Belgian philosopher Jean Ladrière (1921-2007). See in particular *L'espérance de la raison* (Louvain-la-Neuve, Éditions de l'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, Éditions Peeters, 2004).

[2] This volume contains selected papers from the 2007 annual meeting of the Canadian Jacques Maritain Association (May 29-30, at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada), held in conjunction with the annual conference of the Canadian Philosophical Association and the 2007 Congress of the Canadian Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences. All contributions have been peer-reviewed.

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# PART I

# THEORETICAL REASON

## CHAPTER I

# WITTGENSTEIN, FORM, AND THE CRITERION OF UNDERSTANDING[1]

*ROBBIE MOSER*

A longstanding philosophical tradition presents learning – the passing from ignorance to understanding, from mimicry to mastery – as involving the student's mental apprehension of some intelligible form. Ludwig Wittgenstein, who is supposed to have initiated an entirely new way of doing philosophy that broke with the Western tradition, famously argues that what we mean by 'understanding' cannot be a mental process. This series of arguments is taken to be one of his innovations that breaks with the tradition by freeing philosophy from the hold of this account of understanding. Accordingly, one may think that Wittgenstein's arguments destroy the usefulness of this traditional account of understanding. But once we locate the target and purpose of Wittgenstein's attack it becomes less clear that the tradition is in danger. It seems to me that Wittgenstein and the tradition are asking and answering different questions, and it is a mistake to treat the picture of intellectual reception of form as a bad answer – as an answer at all – to the questions that trouble Wittgenstein and prompt his considerations about understanding. Here I want to show that Wittgenstein's arguments leave intact the tradition of describing understanding as involving reception of intelligible form.

In what follows I'll first draw on certain representatives of this longstanding tradition, admittedly not entirely at random. Plato and Augustine treat seriously two particular theses about learning. The first is that knowledge is in some sense already had by the one seeking it. The second is that knowledge cannot be transmitted directly from a teacher to a student as if it were some item to be passed between minds. I highlight these theses partly because they are points with which Wittgenstein agrees, and partly because the point of interest here is shown in the way Plato, Augustine, and Wittgenstein each respond to the same problem in coming to endorse these theses, and, each differ in their display of what exactly these theses show. I begin with a discussion of Plato, and then Augustine. Then I turn to Wittgenstein to draw on his arguments that reject what seems to be Plato's and Augustine's appeal to reception of formal intelligibility. I draw attention to an intractability between the two accounts of understanding, and I speculate about how to proceed if we accept the legitimacy of both the traditional and the Wittgensteinian ways of talking about understanding.

## PLATO AND MIMICRY

In *Republic*,[2] Plato has Socrates describe learning as being 'turned around' away from a focus on material things and towards an intellectual communion with the immaterial and immutable Forms. In *Meno*,[3] Socrates' 'geometry lesson' seems intended to demonstrate this general theory of learning. Socrates wants to show that knowledge is accessible within the knower, on-the-ready to be recalled, and so he addresses the problem of knowledge acquisition in the face of a paradox: I must already know the thing I search for, or I wouldn't be able to know (to recognize) the thing when I learned it. I cannot say for certain, then, whether I am learning anew (this would be a fallible opinion) and what my situation seems to show is that I am recognizing what I am, somehow, equipped to recognize. So Plato has noticed (and bequeathed to us) an epistemological paradox about our criteria for justifying belief: How can we be certain we have knowledge if we do not in some way already understand what would count as knowing the thing in question? What would be our criterion?

Plato proceeds by having Socrates endorse the view that all learning is a "spontaneous recovery of knowledge" (85d), a recollection of pre-possessed forms. Thus teaching is less like 'putting sight into blind eyes' than it is a sort of reminding, by turning already-seeing eyes toward innate formal intelligibilities. Socrates demonstrates this theory by showing how the slave-boy ignorant of geometry actually learns the subject. When the boy sees he doesn't understand after making two squares incorrectly, he is "in a better position in relation to what he didn't know", since he is now disposed to recall the answer because he can be turned more easily than someone who thinks he knows. Socrates doesn't teach the boy, as he stresses to the watching Meno; the boy already has knowledge in a degenerate mode and must "recover it for himself" (85d) and then strengthen his hold on it. The relevant point here is that true knowledge or understanding is more valuable than right opinion because understanding is an epistemic levelling-up since it accesses the forms (98a).

There is, built into the discussion in *Meno*, a possibility open that someone will remain at a particular level of understanding. In *Ion*, Plato addresses this explicitly, and the situation here foreshadows the presentation Wittgenstein gives of our concept of understanding. In *Ion*,[4] the title character claims to be a rhapsode, or master interpreter, of Homeric poetry. Socrates suggests to Ion that to be a master of Homer, one would have to be a master of poetry in general. Ion insists that he has mastered only Homer; he has no interest for other poets. Socrates says Ion is no master, "because if your ability came by mastery, you would be able to speak about all the other poets as well" (532c). Instead, Socrates tells Ion his ability is from a "divine power":

> that's not a subject you've mastered – speaking well about
> Homer; it's a divine power that moves you, as a magnetic

stone moves iron rings. […] This stone not only pulls those rings, if they're iron, it also puts power *in* the rings, so that they in turn can do just what the stone does – pull other rings – so that there's sometimes a very long chain of iron pieces and rings hanging from one another. And the power in all depends on this stone. (533d-e)

Ion has a certain participation in a divine power, which enables him to speak and perform and cite Homer. This is the power or ability by which Ion is able to repeat passages from Homer; that is, he is able to impersonate or mimic master rhapsodes. But he has not recollected, and is not participating in, the general Form of poetry so as to apply his understanding to many particular cases. That is the understanding that would constitute mastery. The distinction between true mastery and movement using the divine power parallels the distinction in *Republic* between true understanding and *mimesis* or mimicry. The mimic has perfected a technique, but the master has understood the principles of the technique.

The presentation here continues to distinguish between the epistemic levels of opinion and knowledge – to recognize and master principles one must first cease to think mimicry is tantamount to understanding. In *Meno*, the slave-boy had to recognize his erroneous beliefs about geometry before coming to a position from which he could begin to know the truth by a gradual process of inductive inference, as it were, slowly recovering and firmly grasping the forms. After the geometry lesson, Socrates concludes that nobody knows "how to hand on to someone else the goodness that was in themselves" (93b). The account of learning has implications for teaching, displaying that a student who well-mimics a teacher may still not understand. Teaching does not implant knowledge into the student, but the signs and actions of the teacher guide the student to eternal forms that exist immaterially removed from the changing world of signs. The grasping of forms is an entirely 'internal' affair.

**AUGUSTINE AND THE CRITERION**

In *De magistro*, Augustine gives an account of learning very similar to Plato's, and he even presents a paradox and an appeal to an innately accessible divine power. But Augustine brings in the divine power at a different stage and for a different reason. For Augustine as for Plato, there is a sort of "teaching through reminding" (1.1.20-25),[5] and there is no transmitting of thoughts through speech or other signs (14.45). Rather, learning is brought about by a private mental event called 'illumination', which is the intellective grasping of the intelligible forms (4.6.80; 12.39.10). Illumination is further described as a flash-of-insight whereby we are granted knowledge by the 'inner Truth' or the 'Teacher within us' (12.40.50). This inner Truth serves as a criterion for assessing the claims of

other speakers, by which students "consider within themselves whether truths have been stated" (14.45.10).

Augustine's argument for illumination is based on a paradox, quite like that of *Meno*. In Augustine the paradox arises from his distinction between sign and thing signified. The paradox is a question of whether signs, such as words, are the source of knowledge of things: If the sign teaches me about the thing signified, I must not already have knowledge of the thing. But in order that I comprehend the significance of the sign, I must already know the thing signified. Thus it follows that if a sign teaches me about the thing it signifies, I must both already know and be ignorant of the thing. (10.33.115) In the face of the paradox, Augustine concludes that "we don't learn anything by these signs called words" (10.34.155).

But, as with Socrates, Augustine thinks it is clear that we do learn. So to explain learning and avoid the paradox, Augustine insists on the epistemic priority of the thing over the sign: "a sign is learned when the thing is known, rather than the thing being learned when the sign is given" (10.33.130). Signs enter into a semantic relationship, called 'signification' with a 'significate', an item designated or exhibited by the sign (4.8.55). So there is a priority of thing-knowledge over sign-knowledge: the sign reminds or prompts us to look for things, but it does not itself give us knowledge of them (11.36), and it is only once the thing is known that we learn the significance of its sign (9.26.40; 10.33.130; 10.34.155). Because of this priority, thing-knowledge is not gained by signification; we know things "not by anything that signifies but by its appearance" in virtue of some direct, unmediated access (10.33.130). To account for this direct access, Augustine introduces the notion of 'self-exhibiting' things that as such can be known without a sign as intermediary.

Augustine sees no way to account for unmediated knowledge of things without appealing to God's granting us the inner light of Truth. It is only through its assent to the claims of others that we may be said to learn (14.45.12). Thus for Augustine the divine power is not merely that which gives us the ability to mimic, but it plays the more important role of providing us true understanding of things. That we understand by "consider[ing] within [our]selves whether truths have been stated" (14.45.10) suggests that signs prompt us to consult our inner light by which we assess signs for truth.

At this point in Augustine's account, we might raise the same problem that Plato addresses in *Ion*. In the moment of illumination when I consult the inner criterion, do *I* assess the truth of claims, or are they 'assessed' for me by the inner criterion? Augustine speaks two ways about this. On the one hand, this inner assessment performed in learning is not an operation I perform deliberately (i.e. cognitively); my knowledge is received passively by a kind of Divine Grace when God "discloses" it (12.40.35). Yet Augustine also says that we learn from signs by "turning inwardly" to assess the truth of claims "according to our abilities". But this

is suggestive of some kind of wilful cognitive act on the part of the student (14.45).

This matters for the account of illumination. If mimesis and understanding each occur by formal (cognitive-behavioural) change as the result of an inner and non-deliberative process, and nothing more, then their difference is only one of degree and not of kind. And this means that Augustine's account may depart significantly from Plato's in failing to distinguish between the epistemic levels of belief and knowledge. If the learner does not achieve a level of understanding higher than mimicry, then Ion might indeed be said, in a way, to master only *one* poet, the slave-boy to recognize the properties of only *this* square. On this view the distinction between mimic and master doesn't hold: for what does it add to our description and notion of understanding to say that whereas Ion has perfected a technique, Homer has mastered its principles, if both perform in the same way? The mimic's repetition of lines of verse or any other activity, demonstrate what we should be prepared to call his understanding; understanding just *consists in* this performance.

Far from being a relic of philosophical history, this view of understanding has long been held in our own day by Daniel Dennett. Dennett says, for example, a very young girl "sorta" understands that her daddy is a doctor, even without knowing what a doctor is – she mimics the claim 'daddy is a doctor', uses it in apt circumstances, and this is all we need (and all we have) to say of her 'she understands that her daddy is a doctor'. The example reflects Dennett's insistence that "[t]here is no principled line above which true comprehension is to be found." [6] Dennett is concerned primarily with the distinction between, say, humans and humanoid robots, such that there is no difference in kind but only in degree of functional engagement with the environment. But this is a special case of the more general view that there is no distinction between the mimic and the master. That is, there is no hard line demarcating mere performance of tasks as expected from mastery of principles. Mimicking in apt circumstances is all there is to understanding, understanding admits of degrees, and so there is no difference in kind between mimic and master.

**WITTGENSTEIN AND UNDERSTANDING**

From "sorta" to sorites, I take it that this view of understanding as performance in apt circumstances leads to soritical miseries and skepticism of the sort popularized in a certain reading of Wittgenstein.[7] In this section I will display only a very small portion of Wittgenstein's writing on the concept of understanding, but a portion selected for two reasons – one, for its presentation of the alleged soritical vagueness of the concept of understanding, and two, for its similarity with the problem already at work in Plato and Augustine. This will serve to show both Wittgenstein's target and the consequences for the sort of picture Plato and Augustine leave us with in their approach to the situation.

When discussing understanding, Wittgenstein presents a series of soritical cases designed to show that understanding is not an inner mental process. In one such case, an instructor 'A' writes down a series of numbers while a student 'B' watches and tries to guess the rule for the sequence. Wittgenstein writes, "If [B] succeeds, he exclaims: 'Now I can go on!' – So this ability, this understanding, is something that occurs in a moment. So let us have a look: what is it that occurs here?" (*PI* §151)[8] Wittgenstein suggests several things that may have occurred. B may have watched as A wrote each number, trying various formulae until he found one that fit them all. Or as he watched he had vague thoughts, and then asked one clear question to himself that allowed him to "find" the differences between the series and allowed him to continue. Or as B watched he just recognized the series and knew how to continue it. Or B said nothing and just continued the series. "Perhaps," says Wittgenstein, "he had what may be called the feeling 'That's easy!' (Such a feeling is, for example, that of a light quick intake of breath, as when one is slightly startled.)" (*PI* §151) After presenting this case Wittgenstein asks:

> But are the processes which I've described here *understanding*? 'B understands the system behind the series' surely doesn't mean simply: the formula '$a_n = …$' occurs to B. For it is perfectly conceivable that the formula should occur to him and that he should nevertheless not understand. 'He understands' must have more to it than: the formula occurs to him. And equally, more than any of those more or less characteristic *concomitant processes* or manifestations of understanding. (*PI* §152)

The characteristic accompaniments in question are images and feelings, often supposed by the tradition of British empiricism to be the very essence of understanding. Wittgenstein's target is just such a view of understanding as a mental state or image possessed by the knower. This sort of state could be an image, a feeling, or even, perhaps, intellectual reception of intelligible form. The point is that talk of the acquisition or activation of such an inner state is unhelpful in deciding whether someone understands; B could 'receive form' (the formula could occur to him) and in no way demonstrate his understanding, which demonstration is the criteria on which our very concept of understanding depends. The demonstration, the performance, is really all that counts. To stress this, Wittgenstein draws our attention to performances and demonstrations as the sort of circumstances in which we say someone has understood or learned:

> If something has to stand 'behind the utterance of the formula', it is *particular circumstances*, which warrant my saying that I can go on – if the formula occurs to me.

> Just for once, don't think of understanding as a 'mental process' at all! – For *that* is the way of talking which confuses you. Instead, ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, 'Now I know how to go on'? I mean, if the formula has occurred to me? – In the sense in which there are processes (including mental processes) which are characteristic of understanding, understanding is not a mental process. […] (*PI* §154)

> So, what I wanted to say was: if he suddenly knew how to go on, if he understood the system, then he may have had a distinctive experience – and if he is asked: 'What was it? What took place when you suddenly grasped the system?', perhaps he will describe it much as we described it above – but for us it is the *circumstances* under which he had such an experience that warrant him saying in such a case that he understands, that he knows how to go on. (*PI* §155)[9]

The circumstances to which Wittgenstein refers here are those features of the situation that call for a certain performance by the student, which is to say, the normative nature of the situation. (He'll also call this an "atmosphere"; *PI* §609.) This normativity is not to be found in a mental event, but rather in the particular circumstances that we glean retroactively from the whole situation: request, performance, satisfaction. If the mimic constantly performs as the master, then there are no criteria available to say that he does not '*truly*' understand. After all, the reason we say the master truly understands is because of the sorts of responses and performances he gives. Our criterion for saying a student has understood is not that we notice she has received and now stands apprised of some formal intelligibility.

In an exchange concerning the nature of teaching, reminiscent of the very situation in Plato's *Meno* and Augustine's *De magistro*, Wittgenstein's interlocutor asks him: "'But do you really explain to the other person what you yourself understand? Don't you leave it to him to *guess* the essential thing? You give him examples – but he has to guess their drift, to guess your intention.'" Wittgenstein replies to this:

> Every explanation which I can give myself I give to him too. – 'He guesses what I mean' would amount to: 'various interpretations of my explanation come to his mind, and he picks one of them.' So in this case he could ask; and I could and would answer him." (*PI* §210)

Here I take Wittgenstein to be firmly engaged with the same problem as Plato and Augustine. Socrates, for example, stresses that he himself doesn't give anything 'new' to the student slave boy – the boy comes up with the answers to the geometry questions all by himself. (I

imagine Socrates telling Meno that when he does philosophy, he just 'leaves everything as it is' as if the nature of *his* work 'consists of marshalling recollections for a particular purpose.') The slave boy 'picks one' of the answers that 'come to his mind'. But whereas the tradition might say that the slave boy has achieved a characteristic and unchanging truth, the Wittgensteinian might say that Socrates teaches the boy the 'normal case' when faced with this geometry problem, and the 'normal (normative) response' will involve going on in a particular way, using the signs as prompts for behaving in a regular way.[10]

The point is driven home in a passage where Wittgenstein is speaking about a cube, furthering his thesis that what we mean by 'understanding' cannot be a mental event. Wittgenstein considers whether the image of a cube must 'come before my mind' – as a mental representation, or sensation, or the like – when I use the word 'cube':

> What really comes before our mind when we *understand* a word? – Isn't it something like a picture? Can't it *be* a picture?
>
> Well, suppose that a picture does come before your mind when you hear the word 'cube', say the drawing of a cube. [As it did before the slave boy! A double-sized cube came before his mind, perhaps, when he said: 'double the sides!'] In what way can this picture fit or fail to fit a use of the word 'cube'? – […] The picture of the cube did indeed *suggest* a certain use to us, but it was also possible for me to use it differently. (*PI* §139)
>
> Then what was the nature of my mistake – the mistake one would like to express by saying 'I thought the picture forced a particular use on me?' How could I think that? What *did* I think? Is there a picture, or something like a picture, that forces a particular application on us; so that my mistake amounted to a confusion? – For we might also be inclined to express ourselves like this: we're at most under a psychological, not a logical, compulsion. And now, indeed, it looks as if we knew of two kinds of case. (*PI* §140)

The joke, calling our attention to the philosophical point, is that we *don't* know of two kinds of case. Compare how Socrates presents the 'changing aspect' of the geometry lesson. When the slave boy is asked to double the area of the square, the signs that occur to him are, perhaps: – 'double the square, so double the sides!' – The signs themselves, that might be 'called to mind' by the boy, seem to *compel* him to this procedure. But then, executing that procedure results in a frustration. Not only does he meet with Socrates's disapproval, but also the figure before him in the sand doesn't look as it should – it is clearly not the double of the initial figure.

Meno's slave boy, subject to Socrates's questions, suddenly finds himself exiled from his inclinations – he no longer knows how to go on, he has hit the *aporia*, and, though it looks and feels like he was stung and numbed by the torpedo fish, he is much the better for it. What Socrates does is to rearrange the signs (the numbers, the length of sides on the diagram) and to recalibrate the boy's inclinations. Now the signs are displayed at work in a new task, a new activity, one in which the correct way of proceeding is demonstrated for the boy, and the boy is encouraged to develop new inclinations to respond in a new way. The Wittgensteinian might now remind us: There is no break between what we are inclined to do and what we must do, between what we 'go on' with as mimic and what we 'go on' with as master. The Platonist might recall Socrates's dictum that the outcome of right opinion and knowledge are, for our intents and purposes, identical.

## WITTGENSTEIN AND THE TRADITION

Earlier I said that Plato's *Meno* shows us an epistemological paradox about our criteria for justifying belief. Both Socrates and Augustine treat it this way, and they arrive at an answer by appealing to an unassailable formal intelligibility, one that cannot be questioned and so needs no justification. On both accounts the unquestionable criterion is a divine and otherworldly affair. In this traditional account of learning, the intrinsic intelligibility of intellectual being is a matter of somehow accessibly innate first principles being a reflected likeness of divine truth revealed in the being of things.

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, concerned with closing the dualisms of the modern philosophical idiom he inherited from studying under Russell, entirely omits the divine otherworldliness – illumination – from Augustine's quotation in the famous first section of *Philosophical Investigations*. Myles Burnyeat and Fergus Kerr each have speculated that this was a mindful omission; Burnyeat says Wittgenstein meant to "accept Augustine's problem as his own and to declare that it must now be solved in naturalistic, purely human terms",[11] and Kerr says this has had the effect of displacing a theological account of human understanding with a naturalistic one.[12] As we have seen, for Wittgenstein understanding consists in our natural and habituated inclinations to perform in certain sanctioned and satisfying ways in response to specific prompts and commands. The criterion of correctness is simply our happily and undeterredly going on in the same way.[13] With this picture, Wittgenstein certainly bypasses any extrahuman appeals.

It may be true that Wittgenstein omitted the context of divine illumination for anti-theological reasons – he was concerned to leave the language of theology and religion to their proper home, and, he was concerned to rid our philosophical life of any appeals to the transcendent.[14] But another plausible reason for this omission is that Wittgenstein noticed that reception of form, divine or otherwise, could not answer his concern.

Wittgenstein was concerned not with how we acquire understanding, but rather with what we are prepared to call 'understanding'.[15] He was as firmly gripped as Plato and Augustine by the epistemological paradox of identifying the justifying criterion for our belief. But he was not going to locate the criterion in anything transcendent or outside of our human practices and inclinations, and this had the effect of 'naturalizing' the criterion, i.e., making the criterion no more or less certain than those very practices and inclinations.

Now we are in position to see why the traditional language of reception of formal intelligibility cannot elucidate Wittgenstein's discussion of understanding, whether the formal intelligibility in question is some Augustinian Divine Criterion, some Russellian 'term' of acquaintance, or from some sort of empiricist sense 'datum'. Appeal to any such item simply begs the question of our certainty in *that* item as opposed to the item it is meant to ground – and if we are standing here we discover that we haven't answered or even sidestepped the paradox that fascinated all of Wittgenstein, Plato, and Augustine.

As I shall now endeavor to show, Wittgenstein's discussion of understanding, concerning as it does the elimination of the epistemological paradox, also does not attack or damage the traditional language describing understanding as reception of formal intelligibility. That is, as I see it, the traditional account does not serve to answer the epistemological problem at all, and instead is a picture at the service of another philosophical question, one that Wittgenstein leaves wide open.

The argument I am about to give is more a petition for attention (and perhaps this is precisely what Wittgenstein and Socrates would have us do in philosophy). I want to highlight the particular disconnect between the emphasis on understanding as performance and understanding as reception of formal intelligibility. My attention was drawn to this for the first time a few years ago as I watched an exchange between two very good philosophers. Father Kurt Pritzl delivered a talk on two types of 'thinking' in Aristotle's *De anima*;[16] the first type, '*nous*', is a non-discursive passive reception of intelligible form, whereas the second type, '*dianoia*', is a discursive activity of the thinker.[17] Pritzl argued that Aristotle laid greater stress on *nous* than many commentators have appreciated, and a central premise of Aristotle's view is that the discursive or reasoning part of intellect presupposes the receptive part: without the intelligible forms garnered from the world, no discursive reasoning would be possible. During the question period Sir Anthony Kenny, historian of philosophy and Wittgenstein scholar, suggested to Pritzl that it would make a difference to his thesis if '*nous*' were translated not as 'thinking' but as 'understanding'.[18] In reply to Kenny, Pritzl returned to the argument of his paper, stressing the necessity of reception of intelligible form in order to have any subsequent thinking (or understanding in the sense meant by Kenny). As I recall, the discussion then moved on to others for questions.

It struck me that Kenny's point was precisely to recall Wittgenstein's treatment of understanding and the various skeptical paradoxes thereby raised about understanding as intellectual reception of form. That is, if '*nous*' were construed as 'understanding', then Aristotle's distinction would collapse – the mysterious process of receiving the formal intelligibilities of things would reveal itself as a poetic-metaphysical way of speaking about what we already see at the level of '*dianoia*', a discursive activity. This activity has normative criteria for success and failure, none of which involve appeal to a reception of form. And the conditions for our speaking about '*dianoia*' exhaust our conditions for speaking about 'understanding'.

Pritzl's reply to Kenny is a common line of reasoning from the point of view of the traditional account of understanding. John Haldane, for example, in a paper engaging Wittgenstein, presents a similar view to argue that mental items must themselves be significant or intrinsically contentful in order to explain the subsequent meaning of our practices and conventions. Just as Pritzl insists that intelligibility must be garnered from the world as a natural function of our intellect, Haldane stresses that "concepts must be naturally and not conventionally linked to what they signify".[19] Haldane takes this insight to show that significance or intelligibility cannot be reduced to acts and performances, linguistic or otherwise, and that "semantic properties depend upon intentional ones, and if this dependence is not to generate a vicious regress we must suppose that in the mental realm content is intrinsic."[20] This is, it seems to me, another way of putting the point (made eloquently by Augustine in *De magistro*) that intelligibility belongs primarily to the domain of things. And, Haldane's mention of "a vicious regress" indicates that he notices the same epistemological paradox that occupied Plato, Augustine and Wittgenstein. Haldane notes the parallel between this line of argument for the intrinsic intelligibility of intellectual presence and first-cause arguments for the existence of God: "With that in mind", he says, "one might title the reasoning above a 'prime signifier' proof."[21]

Now I want to call attention to the particular move made in reply here to the Wittgensteinian viewpoint: it is to insist that no sort of conventional meaning can be gained without a first reception of intelligible form, some truly intellectual engagement with intelligible reality. The 'prime-signifier' proof is an excellent example of this line of reasoning, and it goes hand-in-hand with the emphasis on the role of the receptivity of *nous*.

But to this insistence the Wittgensteinian may always say: 'No, what we call understanding is fixed only by certain performances, utterances, etc., and never by appeal to an inner intellectual event.' That is, the Wittgensteinian line on understanding also takes the form of an insistence that there is no 'prime signifier' to be found, and that the distinction between low-level understanding and mastery is simply on a continuum. (I mentioned Dennett earlier as someone who insists on this

view.) There is an impasse here, and I think this illustrates the intractability of looking to the tradition to challenge or overturn Wittgenstein on this view of understanding.

At the same time, I take this to illustrate how the Wittgensteinian and the traditional accounts of understanding are answering two different problems, or put differently, are at the service of two different philosophical points. If we say (with the tradition) that I have understood or learned because I have received a form, we fail to give a convincing picture about what *warrants* our use of the term 'understanding'. And the latter is what concerns Wittgenstein, holding that appealing to a mental item cannot warrant our use of concepts. Likewise, if we say (with Wittgensteinians) that understanding cannot involve the reception of form, we fail to give a convincing picture of the distinction between mimicry and mastery. And the latter is what concerns Plato and Augustine, holding that knowledge of certain principles will always govern one's inclinations to the correct answers.

What is the target of Wittgenstein's challenge to the traditional account of reception of formal intelligibility? Wittgenstein is not calling into question the evident fact that people learn to do things and master skills, particularly intellectual ones. All Wittgenstein wants us to see is that such a prime signifier, inner criterion, first principle, or any other mental item, plays the same role as yet another sign to which we have epistemic access. Such a sign may direct me how to read another sign, but that direction is rooted ultimately in my inclination to act in *this* way as opposed to *that* way. That is, Wittgenstein continually insists: I reach a point at which I simply act on an interpretation, that is, in such a way that satisfies me, and then when I am asked for the criterion that justifies my performance I can only say "this is simply what I do" (*PI* §217). It wouldn't matter whether God showed me the sign or not – all that might do is instil in me a resolute conviction! But appealing to my resolute conviction no more justifies my subsequent performance any more than appealing to voices in my head justifies my stealing groceries. It is the performance that we await, and the performance that warrants the application of the term 'understanding'.

From this viewpoint, it may seem as if the traditional appeal to reception of form is utterly mistaken, and that all understanding is grounded in convention. But, again, this viewpoint simply invites and prompts the prime-signifier reply (which reply is rooted in the tradition of formal reception) in order to explain how it is that conventions acquire significance at all. So one set of voices denies the intrinsic intelligibility of nature and accompanying mental states, the other set of voices insists upon it. Distinct and incommensurable views of understanding emerge accordingly, each threatening to encroach on the other's field of application. If we do not pay attention to what is being asked and what picture is being advanced, we are liable to stay locked in the paradox that Plato, Augustine, and Wittgenstein worked so hard to dissolve.

There is nothing to prevent philosophers from reading the traditional description of understanding as reception of intelligible form as another way of describing the situation of learning, so long as we do not make reception of form the justification applying the term 'understanding'. It is not that the reception of form shows that Ion has understood; it is that Ion's demonstration shows that he has grasped the form. Or again, it is not that failure to receive form explains Ion's mere mimicry of Homer; it is that Ion's restriction to Homer is describable by saying that Ion hasn't acquired the principles of the art of poetry. To learn rather than merely to mimic (or, to be taught rather than to be trained, indoctrinated rather than inculcated) is to see that a position or proposition follows from some evident first principle, and the master will habituate his inclinations to that inference or performance.

We say one understands when one performs consistently as expected, but there is no contradiction between this way of talking and the description that the student sees a particular fact in the light of a general principle. We just must remember that seeing an answer or action in light of a general principle is not always a justification for that answer or action, and is oftentimes a description. There is compatibility between Wittgenstein and the tradition if we view each as giving proper place to various sorts of descriptions of understanding, each being applied in and answering to different circumstances.

But Wittgenstein and these thinkers may not simply be overlapped as one. Burnyeat's and Kerr's contention that Wittgenstein was chopping away appeals to the divine is apt. The major difference, one that may not be overcome, concerns the status of the 'divine power' in Plato and Augustine. It is clearly something divine in Plato and Augustine (if not otherworldly). But I would draw attention away from the status of the power and instead to the role it plays in the accounts of understanding. In *Ion*, Socrates says Ion participates in a divine power that allows him to mimic Homer; that is, the ability to imitate others words and actions is described as being the result of participating in a divine power. What all of Wittgenstein, Plato, and Augustine recognized is that, at some point in our search for justification, we must appeal to something that does not need to be justified. When it comes to Ion's divine power of mimicking, just as for Augustine's 'Divine Criterion', the buck stops here: we have reached bedrock and our spade is turned (*PI* §217). That is the role of the divine power, and, for Wittgenstein, our de-divinized human practices.

Wittgenstein's 'naturalizing' of this power does not play a significant role in his shifting the meaning of 'understanding' away from reception of form toward circumstantial performance. When the divinity of the criterion is removed from the picture, the question remains whether mimicry alone can anchor the whole concept of understanding. And even with divinity gone, there are plenty of naturalists who feel compelled to insist that understanding presupposes certain mental states that are intrinsically intelligible 'prime signifiers' – and then we may give whatever

sort of naturalistic account of these we like. This view is defended in contemporary philosophy of mind by John Searle – the arch-rival of Dan Dennett, each of them claiming what they like of Wittgenstein for their own cause. [22]

## CONCLUSION

For Wittgenstein, philosophy can teach us "nothing new", and the task of the philosopher consists in "marshalling recollections for a particular purpose", i.e. to return us to what is already known (*PI* §127).[23] Wittgenstein, Plato and Augustine saw that all knowledge proceeds from things already known. For the latter two, the return to things known is described by our apprehension of unshakeable form. But for Wittgenstein – and this is where he begins the whole project of *Philosophical Investigations* – Augustine's inner criterion does not justify our understanding, does not explain meaning, since the appeal to a readily accessible inner criterion simply offers up an unhelpful regress. Wittgenstein situates those appeals back in the midst of our other human actions and signs. What we already know cannot be a divine and otherworldly form, but rather an already noticed practice and sign usage in this world.

Wittgenstein insists that appeal to reception of form or possession of some mental item is a harmful picture of understanding because it makes it seem as if there were a direct one-to-one correspondence between a mental item and a mind that warrants our use of the term 'understanding'. He works to draw our attention to what is actually the case: we apply the term 'understanding' to a variety of cases, all of them contextually sensitive. And it is our use of the term 'understanding' that is justified or not, and its justification always appeals to circumstances of performance, and never to mental structures. Even neuroscience practitioners, with their emphasis on the neurochemical correlates of thinking, would be hard pressed to apply the term 'understanding' to a person who sat motionless and despondent but whose brain activity mirrored the statistical norm for someone who was performing addition. Sooner or later that person had better start calling out sums, or scratch them out on paper, or answer our questions, etc.

The tradition is not an appropriate source to answer Wittgenstein's puzzle if the traditional account of intelligible form is meant to answer how knowledge is justified by some criterion, foundational or otherwise, human or otherwise. Suppose we were to treat reception of form as offering a solution to the paradox of the criterion that occupies Plato, Augustine, and Wittgenstein. It should be clear that a 'form' or a 'divine word', or a 'first principle' all fit the bill for what Wittgenstein means by 'formula' or 'rule' or a similar mental item. Even in cases where the student describes his own 'sudden grasping' of the rule, this occurrence is not enough to distinguish him from a mimic: it is important that he can demonstrate his mastery. And

mastery is manifest only by his actions in response to various challenges of his ability.

But Plato and Augustine move past the epistemological paradox that Wittgenstein inherited from Russell and the whole modern idiom since Descartes, the paradox that he fought passionately and obsessively to uproot and expose as linguistic confusion – even Socrates recognizes that the paradox is a 'trick'. Plato and Augustine reach further to the question of the source of the world's intelligibility. Their accounts move to the otherworldly precisely because no worldly answer will do to answer *their* question. They both see just what Wittgenstein acknowledged, that every physical or sensible sign plays a role no deeper or grander than any other, and so the question of the significance of the signs at all, of our practices, our own thoughts, arises as something that needs an appeal to an extra-physical (metaphysical?) answer. Wittgenstein-influenced folks like Dennett and Searle disagree whether this further question needs addressing. For my money, Wittgenstein himself seemed to think this question was the result of a linguistic confusion, a craning of our necks to see over the edge of our mortality. But Plato and Augustine, those giants on whose shoulders we stand, did not share Wittgenstein's post-Tractarian conviction that we could make no sense of the transcendent.

**NOTES**

[1] I would like to thank members of the Canadian Jacques Maritain Association, especially Louis Groarke and William Sweet, for helpful comments on a much earlier draft of this paper. I have also benefited from discussions with Father Lawrence Dewan, Paul Forster, Hayden Kee, Jean-Francois Méthot, and John Zeis. Their insights only helped to improve the paper. Its deficiencies are entirely my own.

[2] Quotations from *Republic* by Stephanus numbers are given for Plato, *Republic*, G.M.A. Grube, tr., revised by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992).

[3] Quotations from *Meno* by Stephanus numbers are given for *Five Dialogues*, 2nd ed., G.M.A. Grube, tr., revised by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2002).

[4] Quotations from *Ion* by Stephanus numbers are given for *Plato: Complete Works*, Paul Woodruff, tr. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

[5] Quotations from Augustine's *De magistro* are given by section references to Augustine, *Against the Academicians and The Teacher*, Peter King, tr. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995).

[6] See Daniel Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013), p. 68, and his "'A Perfect and Beautiful Machine': What Darwin's Theory of Evolution Reveals About Artificial Intelligence", *The Atlantic* (Online version published June 22, 2012, accessed at: (http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/06/a-perfect-and-beautiful-machine-what-darwins-theory-of-evolution

-reveals-about-artificial-intelligence/258829/) The editor's note indicates that the essay has been adapted from the (then) forthcoming book *Alan Turing: His Work and Impact*, S. Barry Cooper and Jan van Leeuwen (Elsevier, 2012).

[7] I am thinking primarily of Kripke's rendering of Wittgenstein (or 'Kripkenstein') as an arch-skeptic about meaning, from his influential *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). For a discussion of these problems in a context sensitive to the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, see Jonathan Jacobs, "Habits, Cognition and Realism" in *Mind, Metaphysics and Value in the Thomistic and Analytical Traditions*, ed. John Haldane (Notre Dame, 2002), pp. 109-124. Jacobs discusses Quine, Goodman, Kripke, and to a lesser extent, Hume and Wittgenstein. All of these, particularly the first three, generated "skepticism concerning realism about the normativity of concept-use. Each raises basic doubts about there being features of reality that can be registered or represented in cognition and that ground the generality and rightness of our use of concepts," p. 110.

[8] References to sections from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Revised 4th ed., G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trs. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[9] 'The circumstances' = die *Umstände*. Cf. "What would we reply to someone who told us that with *him* understanding was an inner process? – What would we reply to him if he said that with him knowing how to play chess was an inner process? – We'd say that when we want to know if he can play chess, we aren't interested in anything that goes on inside him. – And if he retorts that this is in fact just what we are interested in, that is, in whether he can play chess – then we should have to draw his attention to the criteria which would demonstrate his ability, and on the other hand to the criteria for 'inner states'." (Wittgenstein, *Philosophy of Psychology: A Fragment*, §36.)

[10] *Cf.* Wittgenstein: "Can there be a clash between picture and application? Well, they can clash in so far as the picture makes us expect a different use; because people in general apply *this* picture like *this*. I want to say: we have here a *normal* case and abnormal cases." (*PI* §141); "It is only in normal cases that the use of a word is clearly laid out in advance for us; we know, are in no doubt, what we have to say in this or that case. The more abnormal the case, the more doubtful it becomes what we are to say." (*PI* §142)

[11] M.F. Burnyeat, "Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro*", *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 61 (1987), pp. 1-24, at 24.

[12] Fergus Kerr, op, "Aquinas after Wittgenstein", in *Mind, Metaphysics and Value in the Thomistic and Analytical Traditions*, John Haldane, ed., (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), pp. 1-17, at 15.

[13] I would note how much depends on the will in Wittgenstein, influenced somewhat, no doubt, by his early reading of Schopenhauer. For Wittgenstein, 'incorrectness' or 'falsity' is a species of frustrated will, and 'correctness' or 'truth' is a species of finding no obstacle to our practice and inclination. This emphasis on our will and inclination is how I cast light on *PI* §88 and §322. For a masterful account of the transition from focus on the priority of intellect to will passing from the ancients to moderns, see chapter 3 of Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Recovery of Wonder* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

[14] This theme of anti-transcendence has been a theme of Stanley Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein; see especially "The Wittgensteinian Event" in his *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), ch 8. Anti-transcendence is also the working theme of Lee Braver's *Groundless Grounds: A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

[15] I suggested this in passing in my paper "St Thomas, John Haldane, and Mind", *Études maritainiennes/Maritain Studies* 22 (2006), pp. 108-123, at 121 note 48.

[16] At the 2006 meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association. See Kurt Pritzl, op, "The Place of Intellect in Aristotle", *Intelligence and the Philosophy of Mind*, Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association 80, Michael Baur, ed. (Charlottesville, VA.: Philosophy Documentation Center, 2006), pp. 57-75.

[17] See Pritzl, p. 59.

[18] In *Three Philosophers* Peter Geach insisted that '*intelligere*' should be rendered 'think of' rather than 'understand' because "it is the conventional rendering of Aristotle's *noein*." (pp. 95-96) But the wider context for this rationale is his cautionary note that thought should not be construed as a *relation* but rather as a way of being. See G.E.M. Anscombe and P.T. Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963). Geach also takes this line in "Form and Existence", in his *God and the Soul* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1969), pp. 42-64.

[19] See John Haldane, "Life of Signs," *Review of Metaphysics* 47 (1994), pp. 451-470, at 469.

[20] Haldane, "Life of Signs", p. 455.

[21] He continues: "though, of course, unlike the cosmological argument it is not aiming to establish the existence of a single cause," in "Life of Signs", p. 454 note 10. Haldane is perhaps thinking of a plurality of concepts, in which case he is right. I wonder, though, whether the argument could point to a single cause of understanding, i.e. intellectual being, whereby an immaterial substance is able to take on the form of another as other. This description would be servicing a far different point and picture from the epistemological worry that occupies Plato, Augustine, and Wittgenstein.

²² For Searle's own account of his affinities to and differences from Wittgenstein, see his "Wittgenstein and the Background", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 48 (2011), pp. 119-128. For Dennett's caustic positioning vis-à-vis Wittgenstein see his contribution "Philosophy as Naïve Anthropology" to the lively debate with P.M.S. Hacker in Maxwell Bennett, Daniel Dennett, Peter Hacker, and John Searle, *Neuroscience and Philosophy: Brain, Mind, and Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Searle defends what John Haldane calls the 'prime signifier account' of meaning or intentionality in John Searle, *Mind: A Brief Introduction* (Oxford, 2005), esp. ch. 6.

²³ I am delighted that Hacker's and Schulte's new translation of Wittgenstein's "ein Zusammentragen von Erinnerungen" in the iconic *PI* §127 now calls forth the Platonic doctrine of recollection even more strongly than Anscombe's preferred 'assemble reminders'.

# EXPLANATION, PRINCIPLE, & THE IDEA OF GOD

*LESLIE ARMOUR*

Suppose someone says that God is the ultimate explanation for both the existence and the present state of the world. Such an assertion involves two claims: Everything other than God can be explained by reference to God, and no explanation for the existence of God needs to be or can be offered.

I shall argue that these claims can be sustained if and only if two conditions, one negative and one positive, are fulfilled: (1) God is not to be regarded as an individuated entity whose description figures amongst the descriptions of factual states of affairs in the universe, and (2) the existence of God is to be regarded as a matter of principle.

The first condition seems obviously necessary once one grasps that anything which might exist as a distinct entity depends on some principle of explanation and ordering which individuates it from the rest of what there is. Hence such an individual cannot be ultimate.

Not everything which lacks an explanation is ultimate. For instance, there are (or might be) events of very low probability in a world all of whose explanations are probabilistic. Then one could only say "unlikely events do happen", but such unlikely events are ultimate only on their own ground. They depend on the fact that the universe is organized along specific probabilistic lines. The principle of this organization is more nearly ultimate than they are.

Again, something might explain everything else and yet still, in its turn, have an explanation. The cosmologists' "big bang" might be the beginning of one explanatory series and the end of another.

But the traditional God is the conjunction of something which has no explanation and which itself explains everything else. I shall argue that the claim that God is the ultimate explanation is not intelligible so long as God is regarded as an individuated or individuateable entity in the universe, but I shall argue that what follows from this fact is neither atheism nor pantheism. For God may be regarded as a principle – a principle built into the most basic structure and order of the world.

I must lay the groundwork for my claims by developing some ideas about explanation and some ideas about its limits. There are two distinct questions: What is to be explained and what is an explanation?

Our hypothetical theist is committed to the view that everything except God can be explained, and so we want to know if the list of things which might be explained is co-extensive with the list of things or states of affairs which exist. We also want to know whether or not there is anything

which could be explained but could not form part of some chain leading back to God. We can make a list of things to be explained and of explanations appropriate to them:

Occurrences of things are to be explained: Why are there snowballs? Because water condenses at certain temperatures and its crystals then tend to cluster together because the distance between the basic components diminishes as energy decreases.

States of things are to be explained: Why does water freeze? Because at certain temperatures molecular activity slows down.

Are properties and relations between them to be explained, too? Many philosophers have doubts about the possibility of explaining even the relations between qualities. Why does the property of being red always come associated with the property of occupying space? This question may have an important answer: Redness and other colour properties are determinates of a specific determinable, the property of occupying space.[1]

Willard van Orman Quine and others have argued that qualities are not part of "what there is" because they cannot be effectively individuated.[2] Behind this argument, as Hilary Putnam has noticed, is the notion that it is very difficult to solve the problem of synonymy.[3] To be able to say what redness is we should have to say that every instance of redness is an instance of something which we could specify, and that our specification was a synonym for it. Yet if there are no properties, then there is no way that language can really grip the world except by pointing at things. If so, there are only arbitrary names for things. It does not matter if we agree to call wolves dogs, and dogs wolves. But it does matter that a dog and his worms are two things and not one. It does matter that we think that individuals in a society are at least as real as the society itself. It does matter if reality can be parcelled out at all, and if so, how. And maintaining the reality of properties may not be so difficult. We can say that being red is a determinate form of being coloured, and that being coloured is a determinate form of the property of occupying space. And, once we have this hierarchy, we can distinguish determinates under the same determinable. Being coloured is something one can see, while being hard is something one can feel. Seeing something yellow is something normal people experience under certain standard conditions which are unlike those for seeing something as red.

This kind of answer brings out the fact that properties are not really universals. They are not particulars, either. They are what makes particularity possible. Things are rendered particular by possessing some properties and not others.

Is the existence of any quality, considered in itself, capable of explanation? It may be that "Why is there redness?" is a question without an answer, but that "Why is there redness in the world?" does have an answer. The answer might be "because if one has certain other properties, like the dispositional capacity to absorb and reflect light and this property is discernible by a perceiving agent, there will, if the range of light rays and

dispositions is wide enough, be redness or something equivalent to it." (Something is "equivalent" in this sense if it is what will be seen by persons with the right capacities who are suitably placed.) Such answers are relative and do not serve for all properties.

Importantly, "Why is there goodness in the world?" seems not to have an answer. We can state, that is, the existence conditions for redness; but, though one can create and destroy good things, goodness itself seems to be something different. It is easy to see how there could be no redness in the world. But even if there were no good things in the world it would remain one's duty to talk about goodness – perhaps, even, one's duty would be all the greater. The idea of goodness does approach something which is ultimate.

Finally, the list of what is to be explained includes powers. Some powers pose no special problem. "Why does water have the power to break up aspirin tablets?" has a physical or chemical answer. But it is not so with "Why and how does Ms. Jones raise her arms?" She does it because she decided to do it and by willing to do so. But here there is a curiosity in the explanation. It derives from a general principle which does not, itself, have an explanation. Generally speaking, human beings have the power to do anything whatsoever unless something gets in their way. I do not go to the doctor and ask "Why, whenever I decide to raise my arm, does my arm go up?" Medical science has no answer to this question. I would go to the doctor if I tried to raise my arm and couldn't. And he likely would find that something was amiss. My nerves might be shot, or my arm might be stiff from pitching a no-hitter for the Dodgers last night. Raising one's arm is a case of a power explained by a principle. The principle seems to be a principle of human freedom embedded in the universe. But its lack of explanation would not trouble the theist, for it is what he expects in a world explained by a God who chooses to save us by our own free will.

Other questions – like "Why and how did Shakespeare write Hamlet?" – seem to be of the same sort, but are not, quite. The usual answer would not be "because Shakespeare felt like writing Hamlet." We would expect some answer which called upon a combination of his need or itch to express his talent, and the theatrical situation which made it possible. The taste of the times for dramas that imitated – but did not literally reproduce – something of the ordinary understanding of historical narratives had something to do with it, as did Shakespeare's innate sense of human nature and its motivations. But there has to be more than that. We usually call it "Shakespeare's talent."

Still, the writing of Hamlet is no more than partially explained even if one thinks that an account of Shakespeare's talent is enough to explain such a remarkable creation. Here we must not postulate a general principle – like the principle of free will – but some specific power. But there still seems to be a principle expressed through the power in question.

This list seems quite complete if my arguments hold. Everything I have mentioned, except the quality of goodness, seems to belong to the

things explicable in principle. And this exception is certainly consistent with theism. Suppose, then, we accept that there is no initial objection in principle to the possibility that everything might have a theistic explanation. One must still ask about the sense in which any such explanations could be ultimate.

There are two sorts of accounts of explanations and their ultimacy, which one might call the analytic or component view of explanation and the cumulative or field theory. Analytic explanations pick out some component or components of the situation and urge that these form ultimate explanations. The alternative view is that the system is explained when its overall structure is understood.

Peter Achinstein lists a number of notions of ultimate explanation which seem to be of the first sort.[4] Rom Harré opts for the second sort, arguing that only "field theories" can finally be held, at least in physics. I think his claim can be generalized.[5]

But let us first look at Achinstein's list:

1. It may be that each distinct branch of knowledge has some ideal of natural order which it regards as an ultimate.[6] Newton took the laws of motion as ultimate and explained the deviations. One can say that such explanations take the form of accounts of the way in which some principle appears in or is expressed through various situations. Such principles could only be explained in terms of other principles.

2. It has been held that scientific identities are ultimate.[7] We cannot say why water is the same as $H_2O$. This might pose a serious problem for the theist. Though the relation could be ascribed to the divine will, it implies a brute irrationality in the order of things. If God is irrational, reason cannot lead us from states of the world back to him, and thus he cannot be, in any ordinary sense, the explanation of the world.

What we mean by water is something which we can see through, which is colourless, and which feels wet. Why should atoms of oxygen and hydrogen look and feel like water? It may seem that there is a reason as to why these atoms should take on liquid, solid, and gaseous states (as we saw in the snowball and ice examples), but not for the rest of their appearances. But might we not explain more if we knew more about how various elements interact with the nerve cells associated with our receptors? Could there be a science which disclosed principles about the relation between how things are structured and how they appear? It may seem strange that light waves are not coloured, but are capable of stimulating colour vision. But the fact that certain ranges of light waves stimulate our visual apparatus and others do not can, in principle at least, be explained, and what happens in our brains thereafter can be explained, too. It may seem that there is always some point at which this "scientific identity" is simply a given fact, and that this situation is the result of the celebrated mind-body distinction.

But this intractable problem may arise from a confusion between sensory inputs and interpretations. A colour is not an object on the retina of the eye, nor is it a brain state. (One does not have a red patch in one's brain

when one is seeing red.) "Seeing red" is a way of looking at things which takes advantage of certain information which the brain allows to pass, or which it stores. These correlations are perhaps the result of different ways in which principles are expressed – the same principle which orders light waves, orders colours, and allows a correlation to be made. Thus, again, this kind of explanation may be transformed into an explanation by reference to an ideal order, though it expands the archetype of such an explanation in an important way by giving a richer sense to principle and interpretation.

3. Achinstein calls our attention to the thesis about explanation and probability which I mentioned earlier.[8] If we take probabilities as central to explanation, we can only say what the odds are that a given event will occur. But probability plays a role in explanation only in certain possible universes, those which are indeterministic in their basic structure. But if this is so, it is, again, the "ideal form" of the system which governs all explanations.[9]

4. Achinstein suggests that fundamental facts and dispositions might be unexplainable. This would be so if such facts were used to explain other states of affairs and if no further facts were available which in turn explained them. But the availability of "explanations" in terms of facts and dispositions supposes some underlying pattern. Thus the presence of body B at place P and time T may explain the movement of some other body, $B^1$, at $P^1$ and $T^1$, but only if one has something like the law of gravitation. Scientific laws do not explain the existence of B and $B^1$. But whether B and $B^1$ are ultimate existents or not depends upon whether or not there is some principle which can explain their existence (or the existence of anything) or the lack of it.

5. Achinstein also suggests that natural behaviour might be inexplicable. It is natural for bodies to attract one another directly as their mass and inversely as the square of the distance between them. Whether or not this is another case of the importation of an "ideal" form depends on what one means by "natural". It is natural for sheep to eat grass; if something looked like a sheep but was a carnivore it would belong to a different classification. Given the way sheep are made, it would be absurd to expect them not to eat grass. The way granite is structured, it is natural to expect it to be useful for making buildings.

Similar analyses might also apply to human or animal actions. We usually seek to explain someone's behaviour only if it is "out of character". If a clergyman, after imbibing too much gin, takes off his clothes and reads lewd poems in the pulpit, his behaviour might be explained by his drinking. But what if he preaches a normal sermon? This does seem to be an "ideal form" case. The clergyman is like a Newtonian particle: it is only his deviations which need be explained.

6. Related to the idea of the "natural" and to what is "in character" is the notion that continuous natural behaviour requires no explanation. One does not need to explain why the bridge which did not collapse under yesterday's train also did not collapse under today's train. But this is true

only in rather limited circumstances. The aeroplane which did not fall in bits from metal fatigue on the way from Toronto to Chicago may fall apart on the way back. But gravitation will continue if it simply follows from the way in which things are ordered, ultimately and eternally.

Brian Ellis has urged that behaviour is natural if its continuity does not require "causal" explanations.[10] This serves to distinguish the aeroplane case from the space-and-gravitation case. Ellis makes the same point with a discussion of inertial motion.

7. Finally, Achinstein suggests that some questions are explanatorily ultimate. It has been suggested that every enquiry involves some question which is ultimate. We can ask why bodies obey the law of gravitation, and get answers of various kinds, including the one about the nature of space. But we cannot then ask as part of the *same* line of questioning why it is that we have three-dimensional spaces. We can change the line of questioning. Like Whitrow, we can "explain" dimensionality in space by saying that, without three dimensions, we wouldn't be here. Fewer than three dimensions does not allow enough connections to run a brain like ours; more than three dimensions produce unstable orbits in which the evolution of life as we know it would have been impossible.[11] This is a different line of questioning from the one which led us to gravitation, but both end in some ultimate principle, and the theist will suspect that the two principles will turn out to be connected.

The line of analytic explanations then, seems, in so far as the explanations offered are ultimate, to tend toward the notion of explanation in terms of principles, and of principles as exhibiting an ideal order. But we might question this entire "analytic" line in so far as it consists in isolating and specifying distinct elements or factors in the situation. It is, overall, the state of the "field" which comprises the physical universe which gives rise to fundamental laws and we can only talk about the whole. But this alternative, too, will lead us to a notion of ultimate principle envisaged as a kind of ideal order.

Rom Harré has produced an argument specifically concerned with analytical explanations of entities in the physical world. Imagine a world composed of material objects and imagine that they interact with one another by some kind of contact. One's explanation might go on forever in a way which is vicious. What is imagined is the transmission of a physical causal impulse. No such impulse can, in a finite time, pass through an infinite sequence of interactions. It might come to an end in a way which involved the activity of some ultimate thing, state of affairs, or incident. Harré says that when such actions take place they are explained by the successive states of all the objects. Thus each material object is "deformed."[12] "Action by contact for non-ultimates requires deformation." But what is deformed is influenced by something else and is thus not ultimate: "Ultimates, if material, are not deformable." Harré infers that "either action by contact is impossible or action is discontinuous."[13] But if

action is discontinuous in a system then it will appear to be spontaneous and inexplicable.

Whenever one has a system of distinct entities, the elements, if they explain the situation, must do so in virtue of something which happens to them. For any entities to be identified as the causes of something that is, one must be able to show that something happens to the system and something happens to the entities. If nothing happens to the entities, we have no evidence they are causes of the event, or that the event didn't just happen. It is not only in cases of material causality that this concern holds. If Shakespeare is the cause of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare is, himself, changed in writing it. At the very least, he is a more experienced playwright. But again, short of an infinite regress, such an explanation cannot be ultimate. The ultimate explanation is not some mysterious entity called "William Shakespeare", but the principle of human freedom and whatever principle of action is embodied in Shakespeare's talent.

Admittedly, some explanations which rely on analysis into elements do not seem to require changes in the elements. Suppose one includes in one's explanations such things as numbers and the number system. If the number two is an even number, then, when it is added to any other even number, it produces a third even number. Thus the properties of the numbers explain what happens, but we would not want to say that they were changed in the process. Our reluctance stems from the fact that "two" does not denote an entity in the ordinary sense. Its influence is entirely explained by the principles of the number system. It is because it follows one and precedes three, because it has an irrational square root and so on that two has the influence that it does. The cases where ultimate causes are not distinct states or entities seem precisely to be cases in which what is at issue is really a principle.

We can throw more light on the question of principles and facts by noticing that there are two senses of "ultimate" at work in some of the theses I have been discussing. Sometimes an explanation is said to be ultimate – as in the account of Carl Hempel – if it is simply not possible that anything more could be said. Nothing more can be said of explanations in terms of probability once the probability has been established. But, sometimes, an explanation is said to be ultimate because it is so satisfactory that nothing could improve upon it. Factual explanations, however, seem always to be capable of improvement.

A possible explanation for the fact that this crow is black is that, by nature, all crows are black. If all crows are black, then all non-black things are non-crows. Thus the fact that a certain leaf is green is part of the explanation for the fact that all crows are black. For a green leaf is a non-black thing which is a non-crow. This fact about the leaf is not trivial. If the next green thing is a crow, the result will be fatal to the proposition that all crows are black. Many attempts have been made to dispose of this "paradox", but perhaps the most persuasive attempt is that of Harré.[14] He argues that the "non-black things are non-crows" problem does not arise

when one is considering scientific laws. We only think that "all crows are black" represents something like a scientific law because we think that there must be "persisting generative mechanisms" for there to be scientific laws. That is, we think that there is a reason for there to be only black crows, namely that the genetic structure of crows – a structure shared by all crows which, in fact, is what makes them crows – determines their colour. For there to be a green crow, one would have to have a new gene. Harré claims that "non-black things are non-crows" cannot, in the same sense, be another scientific law and, therefore, that some logical operations, including contraposition, cannot be applied to propositions stating scientific laws.

Unfortunately, to accept this thesis would be to accept that the negations of statements expressing scientific laws are not standard, and that, therefore, we would have logical difficulty in understanding what would count as falsifying them. Furthermore, if there are all-embracing scientific explanations, they must link all facts. Then there must be what Harré calls a "generative mechanism" which makes all non-black things non-crows. Alas, even singular propositions may pose the same problems. "That thing in the corner is red" is a statement which depends for its truth upon the fact that nothing is both "that (particular) thing in the corner" and a non-red thing.

The consequence is that explanations which depend on aggregations of matters of fact can never be ultimate. Ultimate explanations seem, inevitably, to make reference to matters of principle.

If, therefore, theistic explanations are simply instances of explanations which depend on assertions of matters of fact, they cannot be ultimate. But what is the alternative? Sometimes the answer is given in moral terms. Christian doctrine has it that God is not the cause of sin. Sometimes it is suggested that all meritorious acts, by contrast, are either the work of God himself or are the work of divine grace.

But notice that this distinction is not one between acts, per se, but one between principles expressed through various acts. Events which express goodness are divine; events which express evil are not. One might ask how God could take responsibility for the good and not for the evil, since he could readily have produced either, and, once again, there seems to be an answer only if one conceives of God as a principle expressed through events. Then, indeed, the good expresses the essence of God; evil does not.

If what I suggested as the most plausible account of ultimate explanations is true, and such explanations are always in terms of principle, then there must be a principle or set of principles which is itself ultimate. Some principles are only expressible through particular things, and are, indeed, exhausted by them. For instance, the law of gravitation is expressible only through physical bodies. There is nothing more to the law of gravitation than the bodies which obey it and the obeying of it. One could not eliminate them and have gravitation left over. But such principles are never ultimate. One can always ask "Why do we have inverse square laws?". When one is told that this is because of the way in which space is configured, one can then ask "Why is there so much three-dimensional

space?". The principles which explain such matters are not ultimate because the particular things through which they must be expressed are contingent. If there might or might not have been physical bodies or three dimensional spaces – or any spaces at all – then we need an explanation for what we actually do have.

By contrast there are some principles which are not expressed through entities or states of affairs in this sense at all. The number two is not a thing like a chair so that someone might say "The universe contains ten million elephants, six billion chairs, and the number two". The number two would still be there even if there were no things which could be paired in the world. It is, however, exhausted by the principle which it expresses. And mathematical principles are not ultimate because they do not tell us why we have the world that we have and not some other.

But we did find that, when qualities are to be explained, goodness is an ultimate quality. And it may well be that the principle which governs the principle of goodness is ultimate. Goodness is not a thing in the world.

But goodness is not like twoness any more than it is like dogginess. How do we describe the possibility that these different kinds of properties might occur? To say that something is possible is to say that, under certain circumstances, it will occur. If it will occur under no circumstances whatsoever, it is evidently impossible.

When we ask under what circumstances there will be instances of twoness, the answer will be "whenever there are things which are countable and more than one in number". The account which we give has nothing to do with two itself. Of course, such notions as "countability" and "more than one" are associated with the same complex as twoness. But if we ask about these ingredients, we get the same result. Countability occurs whenever there are distinct entities. So does the occasion to apply the idea of "oneness". Twoness has no tendency itself to come into existence. It follows the occurrence of characteristics of quite different kinds of things. The difference is a difference of a logical kind, the difference between being an original characteristic of some sort and being a logically dependent characteristic. Twoness, we might say, is logically parasitical.

When we ask under what conditions will dogginess occur, we must indicate the appropriate factual conditions for a certain kind of life and for the occurrence of whatever process might bring mammals like dogs into being.

Under what circumstances does goodness tend to appear? The answer is, curiously, "under any circumstances whatsoever." It is easier to understand this if one tries to answer the question: Under what circumstances does evil tend to appear? The answer is that it appears to exist only when something is missing. The reason is that evil is, logically, a deviation from goodness in the sense that there could be a paradigm of perfect goodness, but there could not be a paradigm of perfect evil. For something to be perfectly evil it would have to contain nothing which could be good under any circumstances. But being itself can be good under some

circumstances. Therefore evil could not contain being. Being is whatever there is, and, therefore, it always and under all circumstances contains the possibility of goodness. So goodness occurs, at least latently or potentially, in all circumstances. More clearly, every possibility for being is a possibility for goodness.

We could still ask, does anything at all tend to be? But the answer to such a question has to be "yes" if anything is possible, for, if anything is possible, there have to be circumstances under which it would occur. A world which contains nothing, contains no circumstances and so no possibilities. But, since something actually exists, something must, by ordinary logic, be possible.

This principle of the instantiation of goodness must, then, be the ultimate explanation. What, now, of God? I began this paper by exploring the thesis that God is the ultimate explanation. The ultimate explanation is a principle. If God is such a principle, we must explain how there can be, in some sense, a complete instantiation of this principle, for we should only count such an instantiation as God.

This claim seems problematic mainly, I think, because of certain assumptions which we are inclined to make about the relation between principles and their instantiations. But let us return to the law of gravitation and the principle which it exhibits.[15] I accepted that there is nothing more to gravitation than the behaviour of the entities concerned. This would still be true even if it were finally agreed that gravity was to be explained, say, by particles called gravitons. The principle and its expression are distinct in the sense that one can be described without the other, but not distinct in the sense that the principle is a residue which would be left if we had no gravitational events.

Suppose it is so with God and the principle of goodness. Spinoza was roundly attacked in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for seeming to deny this distinction between God and his instantiations. It was supposed that what he must mean by his denial was that a kind of pantheism was true. Malebranche was also misunderstood, though in a different way. It was supposed that Malebranche thought the ideas of God were somehow distinct from the objects through which they are expressed. So he was taken to assert that our knowledge, since it is always obtained through ideas like those of God – by "seeing all things in God" – must fail to include knowledge of things in themselves. But Malebranche insists that God sees his ideas as naturally including their instantiations, for he sees his ideas as complete, and what God thinks to be true is true. God is (amongst other things) the holy spirit which infuses the order of all things everywhere. Such a thesis entails the consequence that there may be more than one complete instantiation of the principle and that different instantiations may be equivalent. But this is one way of stating a central part of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.[16]

We can understand this whole situation better if we think of the problem of mind (as in fact I think Malebranche did) in the way in which,

generally speaking, the Chinese neo-Confucians did.[17] Mind is often described in western philosophy in terms which make it very mysterious. The Cartesian mind (as usually understood, probably despite Descartes) is supposed to be something which has location but occupies no space, which has only some rather fortuitous link, therefore, with material objects, but which is influential on them to the extent of explaining how we move our bodies and change the natural world. But the central notion of mind in neo-Confucian philosophy is *hsin*, a principle. A great debate – elements of which originally divided Ch'eng I and Ch'eng Hao – arose around the question of the relation of *hsin* to the matter which it informed, and it continued into our seventeenth century in the work of Huang Tsung-hsi and Wang Fu-chih. From a tendency to see them as distinct or as so closely related that neither can be properly referred to without the other, the thrust of the debate gradually gave prominence to the notion that principle and instantiation are intelligible only if one thinks of the instantiation as the expression of the principle. They can be truly spoken of as distinct and yet the reality is that one exists through the other.

To have a mind is not only to have a tendency to behave in certain ways, but a tendency to have certain kinds of experiences[18] and to organize things in certain ways. Similarly, to be a person is to have some character or other which figures in the explanation of one's doings. But having a character is having a tendency to do some things and not others, and to experience things in some ways and not in others.

The ultimate principle of the good is a tendency of the same sort. It cannot be actualized without some kind of experience. For goodness is not itself simply another property of things. A thing does not have all its non-value properties and goodness besides. Goodness is not something you might have left after you had eliminated all the other properties of a thing. If evil is invariably the absence of something, then a thing is good in so far as it contributes a complete and seamless picture. But this unity-in-diversity is neither a property of the elements nor of the totality *per se*. The descriptions of the elements demand a measure of diversity. By contrast, a complete and seamless unity – as McTaggart complained of in Hegel's Absolute[19] – would be a perfect blank. It is only in consciousness that the two can emerge in the relation which goodness demands. Yet goodness is not a property which is simply imposed on things by the knowing mind. For its logical connection to all possible reality is, if the argument I advanced is correct, one of necessity.

If goodness does require, for its actualization, the intersection of the thing and its experiencing, then, if God exists, he will be the centre of experience at which this principle is most clearly actualized. In Malebranche's debate with the Chinese philosopher, the issue is whether there needs to be only *li*, or whether the principle of principles needs God as well. The answer is that one needs *li* as *hsin* and that this is what Malebranche's Christian God is.

Here is how Huang Tsung-hsi (1610-1695), who would have been an older contemporary of Malebranche (1638-1715), put it:

> That which fills heaven and earth is Mind *(hsin)*.... The mind has no original substance except what is achieved by its activity. To exhaust and comprehend principles is to exhaust and comprehend Mind's myriad manifestations....[20]

Here is how Malebranche puts it:

> The perfect, infinite being is wise. But he is himself his wisdom.... He is his own light and the light of all other intelligences.... He is both good and goodness itself and all beings take from him all the being they have.[21]

Malebranche was accused of importing Spinozism into his system,[22] but he seems, rather, to take the position of Huang Tsung-hsi, arguing with a character who seems to be Chu Hsi: God creates the world through principles. We share in the divine knowledge in so far as we share in these (scientific) principles. God's principle is a form of *hsin*, and so he sees the particulars as the rational outcome of their instantiations.[23] This seems a reasonable conclusion.

But let me put this in my own way. If the principle behind all explanation is the principle of goodness – if, that is, it is this that must make the world intelligible if the world is intelligible at all – then it will manifest itself as whatever makes this possible. It cannot manifest itself as a set of purely mechanical principles, though it will manifest itself as a universe with as much order as is consistent with the freedom needed for goodness. There will be an orderly background which opens the possibility of the good. But it will also be manifest as a person or persons with as much goodness as any individual is capable of. Such a notion, the notion of an originating principle, and a guiding background pointing to the possibilities of goodness is not so far from the Christian trinity. One must guess that goodness in the concrete would embody the highest order value and virtue which we think of as love, but that is a different story, the outcome of a different enquiry.

More modestly, in such a scheme, while everything is influenced by an explanation in terms of God, not everything is explained by the divine principle. This combination of explanation and freedom posits a situation which is the one which Malebranche ascribes to the human animal: We are impelled toward the good because that is the kind of creature we are. We are basically ordering creatures who seek the good in the sense Aristotle suggested, but we always choose some particular good, and no universal principle fully determines the choice.

This seems to solve the conundrums with which I began. But one might also ask: Does anything count as evidence for such a position?

One can think of two kinds of evidence. One is fairly obvious. Such a suggestion about the universe and God brings to mind the distinction between the Hobbesian human being who is only matter in motion and who is always moved by the need for power so as to maintain a precarious existence and the various pictures painted by Aristotle, Malebranche, and Locke. The anti-Hobbesian pictures portray the human animal as impelled toward the good, stumbling but still pushed on. Is it true, as Matthew Arnold said, that we are never satisfied because we seek the best? Perhaps the answer is in the arts and sciences and all the kindred human activities. But in principle we could have grounds for making up our minds even if at present we are uncertain about which way to go.

The second kind of evidence which emerges from these discussions is something which the positivists generally ignored – what one might call the "conceptual efficacy" of the scheme. Do these schemes tie the loose ends of our accounts of ourselves in the universe in a way which makes our affairs more intelligible than their alternatives? What is such intelligibility?

One might think that such intelligibility is after all the point of conceptual schemes in general – unless they are simply to be judged in a Jamesian way in terms of the satisfaction they give or fail to give to their users. And, even then, is not F. C. S. Schiller right to suppose that this satisfaction must in the end be "cognitive satisfaction" and not some other kind?

**NOTES**

[1] This may be important. Ernest Nagel proposed what seems to be an argument based on this or a similar notion as a kind of refutation of idealism. See *Sovereign Reason* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1954), reprinted in Peter Angeles, ed., *Critiques of God,* (Buffalo: N.Y., Prometheus Books, 1976), 354.

[2] See Willard van Orman Quine, "On Speaking of Objects" in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 19ff.

[3] Hilary Putnam, "On Properties" in *Essays in Honor of Carl G.Hempel,* ed. Nicholas Rescher (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969), 235-254.

[4] *The Nature of Explanation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 291-321.

[5] Rom Harré, *The Principles of Scientific Thinking* (Chicago: The University Press, 1970). I do not mean to suggest that Harré himself would sanction this generalization.

[6] Achinstein ascribes this view to Stephen Toulmin. See Toulmin's *Foresight and Understanding* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981) (originally published London, 1961).

[7] Robert L. Causey, as Achinstein notes, explores this notion in *Unity of Science* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1977).

[8] This thesis was most clearly developed by Carl G. Hempel in *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

[9] See note 1., above.

[10] Brian Ellis, "The Origin and Nature of Newton's Laws of Motion" in Robert G. Colodny, ed., *Beyond the Edge of Certainty* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 29-68.

[11] G. J. Whitrow, *The Structure and Evolution of the Universe* (New York: Harper, 1959), 199-200.

[12] This is Harré's word. He apparently means "has had its form changed". There is no pejorative intention.

[13] Harré, *The Principles of Scientific Thinking*, 259.

[14] Harré, *The Principles of Scientific Thinking*, 169.

[15] There may be a problem about how laws are related to principles. The distinction which I would make is simply this. A "law of nature" expresses a principle of order which is of such a kind that it universally – and within whatever limitations are contained in its expression – links patterns of occurrences. The "within whatever limitations" clause permits laws with probabilistic expressions, since the sequence will then be "invariant" in the sense that it invariably lies within the probabilities specified. There are other principles of order, such as those in number theory which do not link occurrences. And there are moral principles which *ought* to link patterns of occurrences.

[16] Orthodoxy apparently holds that the number is neither more nor less than three. I know of no philosophical justification for this limitation.

[17] They include – though there are distinctions among them – Ch'eng Hao, Ch'eng I, Chu Hsi, and our own near contemporary Fung Yu-lan. Descriptions of all these philosophical positions and excerpts from the works of each of the philosophers can be found in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963).

[18] I have explored *this* thesis at some length in *The Rational and the Real* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962).

[19] John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart, "The Further Determination of the Absolute", in S. V. Keeling, ed., *Philosophical Studies* (London: Edward Arnold, 1934), 210-272.

[20] *The Records of the Ming Scholars,* trans. Julia Ching and Chaoying Fang (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 12.

[21] Nicholas Malebranche, "Entretien d'un philosophe chrétien et chinois," *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, Vol. XV (Paris: J. Vrin, 1958), 21 [my translation].

[22] *Oeuvres de Malebranche*, Vol. XV, contains some of the arguments which followed the publication of the *Entretien.* There, p. 44, Malebranche takes issue with one of his anti-Spinozistic detractors.

[23] The inevitability is of different kinds, of course, depending on the structure. The character of man predisposes him to certain things without forcing him. The nature of man is to seek the good, but Malebranche insists that when it comes to choices of *particular* goods we are not necessitated. *The* good, *per se,* is not fully influential because we can only act through our incomplete comprehension of it.

# INTELLIGIBILITY, METAPHOR, AND CONCEPTUAL TRANSFIGURATION

*ELIZABETH TROTT*

## INTRODUCTION

I shall begin with Hegel as a way of establishing reason as the framework of intelligibility. I then explore our capacity to re-conceive objects of experience through different conceptual frameworks, a capacity that has been co-opted by the art world. I suggest that this capacity is not restrained by the limitations of reason but offers a different kind of revelation about our engagements with the world. Language is both part of the world, and also about the world. To be about the world as a tool of communication it adopts dialectical restraints to ensure a shared mode of operation. For language to be of the world it can assume forms that reveal the world in ways that standard logics do not. As argument, language is about the world. As poetry, language is a part of the world or, it is a language object in the world. When linguistic tools, such as metaphors, are a part of the world, multiple perspectives are available and even encouraged. We discover meanings that would not be available to us in our daily conversations. That which is intelligible is also revealed through the fluidity of our capacities to transfigure puzzles, contradictions and the unexpected (unintelligible features of experience) into statements about the world. Yet that transfiguration process can obfuscate the boundaries of truth, making intelligibility less a measure of the world and more a measure of our intentions and agendas.

## HEGEL

Hegel wrote about the Unhappy Consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Mind*. "On the one side it takes its stand as the active present, (*Diesseits*), and opposed to it stands passive reality: both in relation to each other, but also withdrawn into the unchangeable, and firmly established in themselves".[1] Consciousness knows itself as actively struggling to know the passive reality which seems to escape it. Consciousness may know itself in being a feature of that reality as a universal passive state, but only through its particularity as willing, acting, enjoying.[2] Consciousness is thus caught in the dialectic of acting in the present while knowing itself to be passive as a universal. The unhappy consciousness, as particular, seeks to understand reality but is restrained by only knowing actions through its particularity. Still Hegel gives us hope that through our awareness of this experience, our

understanding of reason as consciousness made absolute is increased. Reason is, in essence, all of reality.

Hegel will go on to argue that Reason "is the certainty of being all reality".[3] Yet consciousness must deal with the understanding of difference that informs its nature, in that it is both particular and universal. In contemplating itself as informed by dialectical categories, consciousness learns that it is free as an agent of action and understanding, because the dialectic of its very existence is not a static logical description but the seeking, the willing, the yearning to unify itself (as particular and universal) through understanding its perceptions and experiences. For the Hegelian, the meanings of the world are not given. They develop in the constant synthesizing of perceptions through epistemological yearning. We develop knowledge through the separation of the essential and the contingent.[4] This process of distinguishing the essential from the contingent is continual; it is not a series of steps which create fixed epistemological or metaphysical states. What is essential in knowing may become contingent as we learn and synthesize new understandings. Knowledge can shift from the essential to the contingent as we re-organize our categories to adapt to new discoveries.

**THE CONCEPT OF NATURE: AN EXAMPLE**

Consider the concept of nature as a universal. It is only useful with a background of particular understandings.[5] Nothing is natural until we declare it to be so. Nature does not present itself to us anymore than does space or time. Within the world of particulars, as grasped by conscious agents, the constructions of human consciousness require the dialectical *other* of the universal to reveal the particular differences of things and creations. The concept of nature does considerable work for us as a concrete universal. It serves to demarcate sets of particulars; it also stands as a universal other, being that which is not of our own making (an ocean or a mountain).

And yet, the concept of nature has undergone considerable changes in meaning. Such changes in meaning have resulted in changes to justifications for human actions and agencies. For Kant, nature was the prime source of aesthetic beauty, the inspiration for the romantic poets and artists of the day. A continent away nature was better understood as wilderness. Roderick Nash traces the etymological roots of wilderness to German, meaning wild game, uncultivated land, heavily forested land and land of wild beasts.[6] Nature, as wilderness, meaning untamed places, shifted in its particularity to include "any place in which a person feels stripped of guidance, lost and perplexed… large disordered collections of things, the moral chaos of the degenerate… ".[7] Wilderness, no longer a particular for the universal concept of nature, became a universal with its own developing sets of particulars. As early as 1898, wilderness had evolved in its meanings to become a metaphor for chaotic development in cities.[8] The evolution was

confirmed with the title, *the Neon Wilderness,* a book of short stories first published in 1947 by Nelson Algren.[9]

The universal concept of nature gradually acquired multiple contingent meanings each aspiring to serve as a universal within its own context. Today the meaning of the concept of nature fluctuates according to stake-holders and partisans. The intelligibility of the concept is contingent upon human decisions as to what is and what is not natural. For example, if raccoons can live quite happily in cities, does it make sense to talk of their natural habitat?

We might better understand the word nature as a designator of the degree of human involvement in the world, not a differentiator of kinds of places or things.[10] Indeed various designations of pristine wilderness or natural spectacles may be as much the work of human habitation a millennium ago as it is the random effect of a developing planet.[11]

Even the weather and the climate may be a result of human involvements. Certainly there are forces in the world that seem to be beyond our control (earthquakes, hurricanes and volcanoes) but there are none that are puzzles, contradictions, or unexpected, given the amount of knowledge that we now have. Tsunamis may arise without warning, but they are not inexplicable and were we able to track every change on the planet we could anticipate events which accompany those changes. The concept of nature at present refers to various particulars (interpretations). Nature, as a universal (dialectical) other, has been transformed into a particular category of human knowledge. The yearning of the unhappy consciousness has collapsed the universal concept of nature into a particular kind of human knowledge. That collapse has a new universal *other* that the yearning of consciousness must now confront, the universal of human survival made meaningful by the particularities of individual willful restraint.

The point of this excursion into the concept of nature is to argue that concepts which seem fixed as universals, when made particular can absorb sufficient contingencies that they may alter and become the source of new universals. "Nature" can become "wilderness" and with this change, the purposes that we thought the concept of nature served change as well. Nature (non-human), no longer a universal concept, is a particular concept within purpose-driven discourse. Its meanings are embedded in a plethora of competing interests. That which is non-human has become particularized according to religious beliefs, medical advancements and genetic engineering. Such shifts in meaning often take a long time. Societies must be developed, cities built, histories established, institutions well rooted, philosophy books written. The Hegelian dialectic marked out the structure of thought within which many shifts in our concepts and their criteria of inclusion occurred. The dialectic of self and other offered a rational universe within which change, even in conceptual contents, could be understood.

**THE ASSAULT ON REALITY**

This rational universe is now under assault. The clarity of old familiar concepts is not as lucid. The world, with such progressions framing our acting, our willing and feeling, seems less intelligible as we scramble to keep old cornerstones of meaning secure. Concepts of God, nature, truth, justice, beauty, equality and art are in rapid transitions, not necessarily losing their status as universals but diversifying in their capacity to create identity relations between particulars. Yet our Hegelian yearnings to unify the dialectic of discourse that we have developed – dialectic relations which make any communication possible – do not result in an inward retreat to consult with the self. When Hegel writes further about the unhappy consciousness he gives us some clues as to how we cope with change. "The unhappy consciousness, however, finds itself merely desiring and toiling … Its inner life remains still a shattered certainty of itself; that confirmation of its own existence which it would receive through work and enjoyment…."[12] Through work, through acting in and upon the world, we create and engage with the meanings that enable us to participate. In doing so the self builds confidence that the world is intelligible. Work is the conquering of the unintelligible world by transforming it in accordance with our reason and desires. Working reveals the world's-being-for-us; it soothes the unhappy consciousness. Yearning and toiling create the intelligible; knowledge secures the universal. Enjoyment is the capacity to function, to understand grow and flourish in the world as we know it. The intelligible world should surround us. However, each day the sense of participation in the march of reason through time can seem remote. The metaphors that can help us with conceptual transitions are becoming strained.

Consider the following example: A familiar metaphorical phrase has been that all men and women are equal in the *eyes of God*. The early association of church and state at least brought the religious vocabulary of equality into the discourses of politics.[13] God "sees us all." Not only has the continued proliferation of religious wars weakened the hope embedded in the metaphor (God's eyes) but some philosophers have been very busy dismantling the metaphor and the meanings it made convenient to us.[14]

**METAPHORS AND CONCEPTUAL TRANSFIGURATION**

Metaphors have been the staple for easing us through shifting categories of universals and particulars. God's eyes, justice as harmony, a kernel of truth, love as an apple, arrow, rose (to mention only a few), marriage as a bond, trap, a contract, etc., all of the above have associations with historical times and social changes. They have directed us and enabled us to approach accepted truths with skeptical imaginations. Recently, even the concept of a metaphor has been reconceived, from being a useful associative idea to a willful mental shift, or a conceptual transfiguration. Rather than choosing an idea that captures the essence and orientations of universal categories and

their collective particulars we can now choose to simply regard a particular or a thing as something entirely different. We decide how to regard and think about it, unrestrained by the universals that have traditionally anchored our thoughts.

## DANTO AND TRANSFIGURATION

This mental capacity of changing the status of something by a decision, will be better understood by using Arthur Danto's theory in his book, *Transfigurations of the Commonplace*[15]. Danto pursues the following question: What is going on when there are two identical things, (except for their location in space) yet one is a work of art? He observes that the concept of art is historical and has altered over time. Danto's example of a pile of rope, a pile of which surely existed in the 17th century yet would not have been a work of art, demonstrates this historicity. Today a pile of rope can be a work of art. The concept of art in the 17th century "had not evolved in such a way as to be able to accommodate it as an instance".[16] Danto cites events, both historical and cultural, as necessary backgrounds for the evolution of our beliefs about art. For example, the concept of art has incorporated into its understanding a definition of itself. Consider: If the boundaries between art and reality become blurred, then those blurred boundaries can become the subject of aesthetic reflection.[17] The paint drips of Jackson Pollock were transfigured into art because the art world reconceived art as process not product; the paint drips could now become subjects of aesthetic contemplation. Danto observes, "just about anything can be an expression of anything, providing we know the conventions under which it is one and the causes through which its status as an expression is to be explained, so in this sense anything can be a work of art".[18] Knowing the appropriate current rules and conventions for interpreting can help us sort out the artworks from the paint drips. It is not just knowledge of the rules and conventions of artworks which have evolved. Danto suggests that the concept of reality has evolved, shedding its original shroud of magic. In changing from being magical to manageable, reality acquired the characteristic of being the "other" from art. Art was not reality. This shift required adopting a new set of beliefs, but it also freed art from the conventions and rules which defined reality, the ones I alluded to at the beginning of this paper. In short the world of art could establish its own conventions and rules.

Art easily shifted from representing the world to being about the world.[19] Danto likens this sense of 'aboutness' to the role that language plays, when language is both a part of the world and yet is also about that of which it is a part. Art also enjoys this dual role being about what is real and yet being included in what is real.

In the real world, art becomes subject to the rules and conventions of reality, perhaps requiring a Hegelian framework to document what a particular work expresses. But considered as an expression about the world

and not dependent on language for its interpretation, art "externalizes a way of seeing the world".[20] This idea of a way of seeing is no longer determined by the conventions of reality framed by logic or language. A way of seeing can now find purposes for ordinary objects and shift them from being contents of the world to commentary about the world. They can assume the dual role that language and art have always enjoyed.[21] Andy Warhol (1928-1987) exploited this phenomenon with his hamburgers and soup cans in the 1960's. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) however, preceded Warhol when he "created" the Fountain, (a man's urinal with a signature) in 1917. These art works are ordinary objects displayed to fulfill a different purpose; they are to be about the world, a comment of some kind, a revelation or insight. In accepting beliefs about this capacity of art, we choose to see, for example, ordinary objects as art. We anoint them as art. In the art world, an apple can be perceived as a not-apple even though under a different set of belief structures we could identify another particular work of art as being an apple.[22] Danto thinks that our acceptance of different sets of beliefs associated with the same object enables us to see different properties of objects not available to us by simply using our senses. When an apple is transfigured, we experience it differently.

In so far as one may be educated in the history of art, the concept of art, aesthetics and all relevant literature, nothing compels the viewer to accept the invitation to see things classed as art as being about the world. One can still regard paint drips as paint drips, because even though some beliefs require one to see a collection of paint drips as an artwork, other beliefs allow one to reject their aesthetic status. The beliefs and conventions of the art world, once known, are not logically necessary as are the logical oppositions found in Hegel's works; but they are tools of intelligibility, available for one's use.

## ARTIFICES AND MEANINGS: ROGER SCRUTON

The proliferation of artifices that now crowd our world suggests that we need all the tools that can be mustered for making the world intelligible. More importantly we need to recognize when these tools, such as metaphors and conceptual transfigurations, are being used to confuse the realities we have relied upon and to direct our thinking. These artificial simulations are one factor in the collapse of cherished universals and trusted separation of self and not-self.[23] Reality, as a concept, no longer carries weight according to the mass culture theorists of our day. Roger Scruton captures the modern take on the arbitrariness of our world. He refers to the culture of today as a culture of repudiation.

> To know reality is to know it through signs, and signs are our
> invention. If at times we have the impression that we compare
> our thought with the world, that we measure our utterances
> against the standard of some absolute reality, then this is no

more than a comforting illusion, engendered by our complacent posture *within* language, and our inability to transcend language to the point where its limitations can be grasped. Thought can only be compared with thought, and the category of reality is no more than one among the products of the intellect, a frame through which the ceaseless flow of experience is viewed. When we appear to shift from thinking to the world, in fact we shift from frame to frame.[24]

Scruton argues against the modern conceptions captured above, where reality is a human construct and the categories of understanding are *all that there is*. But the perspectives in the above quote permeate the academy and filter down through its graduates. Not only that, the world of media more and more defines what constitutes reality. We do not have to make it meaningful through our labors and creations; we can receive it ready made presented to us through innumerable models from which to choose. Today we have reality, virtual reality, unreality, fictional reality, all vying for our allegiance with equal confidence. These shifts in meaning of the concept of reality weaken it as being a working concrete universal on which to anchor truth claims. The rational is no longer the only real. The concept of reality has been replaced by representation; the concept of truth slides toward culture; equality is suspicious and now languishes in the discourse of hegemony and power.[25]

Yet one does not have to give up on reality, the self, or the dialectic of discourse, because, Hegel was fundamentally right. We strive to tame the chaotic by understanding its components and we continue to work through rational structures to make the chaotic intelligible. We struggle to make the unintelligible cohere with time-tested epistemological frameworks of our culture.

## DEMOCRACY: AN EXAMPLE OF THE ASSAULT ON CURRENT REALITY

Democracy, a political theory based on hundreds of years of hard thinking, came to fruition because it best addressed the universal values of freedom and equality that guide and inspire the human world. Democracy was not invented overnight to appease the restless public. Nor can one export democracy through military declarations translated to the public by political spin doctors. Democracy requires an educated public committed to the values that define democracy for the political system to be viable. [26] A democracy sustained by guns is unintelligible. Yet the grip of the media as a creator of realities on the modern mindset can portray the unintelligible as making perfect sense. A group of poorly trained and even more poorly educated soldiers can be portrayed as a new demonstration of freedom through the metaphor of 'self rule'. No self, individual or collective, disciplines itself with a gun.[27] Self rule means discipline of the self, by the

self, and that could be an individual self or a collection of individuals as a state. A reinterpretation of democracy (that self rule requires young men with guns) is the transfiguring process purporting to further intelligibility in the world, but it is a transfiguration of democracy that is deceitful. A democratic metaphor – 'self rule with guns' – can only be designed to deceive us.

## THE CHOICE FACTOR

What is significant in these above observations is the fact that we can choose to transfigure aspects of our world. Without the restrictions of the rational framework, (A in conjunction with not-A in the same space and time represent a logical contradiction), one can also choose the conceptual apparatus to convey one's transfigurations to others. We can create our own metaphors. Transfiguring objects and things is possible because we can choose to be artists of language. We can decide to make ontological shifts when those shifts make the world more intelligible. For example, one could regard the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan as something worthy of one's support. Yet on closer consideration, *support* is just a metaphor for 'hoping all turns out well.' Basically this claim about supporting the troops is an emotive claim informing us about an individual, not a particular statement about the world. This claim is of the world, but not about the world.

   The choice of the word 'support' verges on the metaphoric because of the enormous ambiguities it sustains. Support can mean to contain (as the pillars of a fort), to hold up (as a cement foundation), to accompany (as a set of companions), to encourage, (as offering moral support), to restrain, (as in support hose for varicose veins). In our helplessness in formulating a real position, when we are privy to so little knowledge about the mission in Afghanistan, we transfigure our confusion through the metaphor of support. To regard the mission as something that "I" can support lends an air of actually saying something about the world. But, at best, it is merely a way of seeing the world. The Hegelian *other* fails us as we cannot be sure who or what the real *other* is. The dialectic of understanding offers little to clarify our confusions since the universals of our ordered world no longer reflect the truth.

## THE APPEAL OF CONCEPTUAL TRANSFIGURATION

Making the world intelligible through metaphor is no longer the sole domain of the philosopher, the writer and the poet.[28] It is now a tool of intelligibility in an increasingly distorted world. For reality to hold together we have to hope the metaphors we grasp at are shared. Some are, though the way of seeing they offer is not necessarily comforting. Consider the Web as a modern day metaphor. The implications of its meanings would frighten some, (a sticky trap where one will be consumed unless one has created it

for oneself), and inspire others (an all encompassing ever expanding network). At least we can choose our use of the metaphor as it continues to define our lives. Our capacity to conceptually transfigure things and events, that is, to create meaning by simply choosing to regard the world and its contents through whatever conceptual framework we think will best serve our purposes, leaves us all vulnerable to the power of those who can present the world to us most convincingly, mainly the media. Being able to sort through the transfigurations requires a stable supply of metaphors that anchor universal truths. As the supply dwindles and is replaced by the conceptual constructions of the day, so dwindles the intelligibility of the world. We can choose to create meanings about the world of which we may no longer feel a part. Transfiguring is a process fraught with danger, as imaginations untamed by civic virtues may invite unsavory discourses. Still, discourses of any kind are open to Hegelian discussion, whereas visions without debate are not. Hegel was surely right. We will never abandon the dialectic of understanding. But as artists of intelligibility we need to cross-examine all new meanings that are offered to us.

**NOTES**

[1] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind,* Trans. J.B. Baillie, (London: Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966), 260-261.

[2] Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind,* 262.

[3] Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind,* 276.

[4] Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind,* 286.

[5] It is not my intention in this paper to engage in a full discussion of Hegel's concept of Nature. It is interesting to note that Hegel somewhat shifted his position on the concept of nature between the *Phenomenology of Mind,* in 1807, and the *Encyclopedia, Part Two* on Nature (in 1817, 1827, 1831). In the *Phenomenology,* nature is more unified as a whole. "…their animating unity [the elements] which is ever dissolving opposition into unity, as well as breaking up their simple unity into opposite constituents: earth is the tightly compact knot of this articulated whole, the subject in which realities *are*, where their processes take effect, that which they start from and to which they return. In the same way the inner essential nature, the simple life of spirit that pervades self-conscious reality, is resolved, spread out into similar general areas or masses, spiritual masses in this case and appears as a whole organized world." (English trans., Oxford, 1970, 518) Though there is not a moral harmony between nature and self-consciousness (615), nature is the essential other which makes possible the arena of moral engagements, thus, it is part of the unity of thought (777). Hegel's analysis of Nature, in *the Encyclopedia*, is much more precise, attributing to it capacities to be understood as a mechanical system, a particularity within the theorizing of physics, and a self-determining other, or an organic system. Each of these conceptions reveals contradictions within each system, contradictions which struggle for dominance and

resolution. Now nature is "living Whole" (*The Philosophy of Nature*, 1970, 240). Nature as a whole, has no particular telos. As organic, its purpose is to survive; as external material, it is the ground or dialectical requirement of survival; as physics, it is the changing opposition of consciousness, determinate in form, but Nature is also "*unresolved contradiction*" (17). By unresolved contradiction, Hegel means the perpetual forces characterized by their externality that engage us in the thought processes we know as physics – the yearning and effort to unite all that we can know in a unified whole, or idea or Spirit. Nature, as its own living whole, demands perpetual effort (on the part of consciousness) to bring it as universal system into the Absolute. Our understanding strives towards this resolution of self consciousness and nature, unsatisfied as we are with contradictions of any kind. With this shift from certainty about the concept of nature, to the need for much less complacent metaphysical approaches, Hegel anticipates the multiple meanings that we continue to develop in trying to understand the concept of nature.

[6] Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press, 1967), 2-3.

[7] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3.

[8] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3.

[9] *The Neon Wilderness* has recently been published by Seven Stories Press, 2002.

[10] There are no photographs of nature as such. Every photograph carves out s selected piece of a landscape for viewing, a piece chosen to have a certain effect in a particular light for a designated audience. What the viewer sees has been constructed for him or her, the viewing experience of nature is man-made.

[11] See "Man-made Nature," Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn in Kent Peacock, ed., *Living with the Earth* (Harcourt Canada, 1966), 143-149.

[12] Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 259.

[13] When, in 1651, Hobbes argued strongly in the *Leviathan* for the separation of church and state, it was not because he thought the metaphor of God seeing us equally to be inappropriate, but because human greed and lust for power had created a fog over the actual realization of the goal of equality. Perhaps man-made law might be a better tool for seeking justice than the divine rule of those who claimed to 'see' with God's eyes. See the *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill Co. [The Library of Liberal Arts], 1968), 93-119.

[14] See Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (W.W. Norton, 1986).

[15] Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, 1981).

[16] Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 45.

[17] Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 51.

[18] Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 65.

[19] Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 80.

[20] Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 208.

[21] Supra, 1.

[22] For further explorations of the shifting parameters of art see Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe* (University of California Press, 1982). In it he explores the possibilities of art displaying what would be logical contradictions in any other context, as he examines Rene Magritte's famous artwork done in 1929 with the above title incorporated into the painting of a pipe.

[23] Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind,* 259.

[24] Roger Scruton, *The Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 2000), 138.

[25] Jean Baudrillard is the most prominent proponent of the loss of representations as mediators of the world to simulations which have no relations to any reality whatsoever. No judgments can separate the truth from the false or the real from the artificial. This can be further explored in his landmark essay "Simulacra and Simulations," *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford University Press, 1998), 166-184. Michel Foucault reduced the world to being a product of languages and discourses and the power one had to wield them effectively determined what others would experience as real. See Michel Foucault, *Power/ Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*, ed., Colin Gordon (Pantheon Press, 1980).

[26] The best known work supporting this position is John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (The Macmillan Co., 1916). The earlier work done by T. H. Green in the 1870s on democracy and education put the wheels in motion for public schools in England. See Darin R. Nesbitt and Elizabeth Trott, "Democratic Paradoxes: Thomas Hill Green on Democracy and Education," *Paideusis,* 15/2 (2006), 61-78.

[27] While there may be reasons for committing suicide, doing so signals the failure of self discipline; suicide is choosing to cease being a self.

[28] The use of metaphors as a means to explain reality has been explored in my "Watson, Bradley and The Search for a Metaphysical Metaphor," *Bradley Studies*, 2/1 (Spring 1996), 5-23.

# PART II

# PRACTICAL REASON

# MARITAIN, AQUINAS, AND THE INTELLIGIBILITY OF THE NATURAL LAW

*DAVID J. KLASSEN*

In a pluralistic and secular age,[1] the idea of the natural law retains its appeal because it promises an objective basis, independent of religious doctrine and belief, for reasoning about human conduct, law and the social order. Jacques Maritain's twentieth century contribution to our understanding of natural rights, and his defence of the natural law, have rightfully earned him widespread admiration.[2] In this paper, however, I will examine what I consider to be the least satisfactory part of Maritain's explanation of the natural law: his theory of how the natural law is *known*.[3] While Maritain's theory of knowledge through connaturality or inclination has the advantage of offering an explanation of how the natural law is known to everyone, and not only to metaphysicians and moral philosophers, I maintain that that strength is more than offset by the theory's shortcomings.

## DIFFICULTIES WITH MARITAIN'S THEORY

Like St. Thomas Aquinas, Maritain refers to the precepts or principles of the natural law as principles of practical *reason*.[4] Maritain sometimes suggests that only one principle of the natural law is unchangeable, universal and known to everyone: "Act in conformity with reason."[5] Nevertheless, although he says that its precepts belong to reason, Maritain maintains that it is only through connaturality, that is, through tendencies or inclinations that in the order of knowing are *prior to* reason, that we come to know the natural law. He says that the natural law is known by a process in which "the intellect is not at play alone, but together with affective inclinations and dispositions of the will, and is guided and directed by them."[6] The paradox at the heart of Maritain's theory is that in order to act in conformity with reason, we are to consult not reason itself, but the affective inclinations and dispositions of the will which are said to guide human reason. While acknowledging that the natural law consists of precepts of reason, Maritain says that these precepts are known non-conceptually and non-rationally.[7]

I will argue that Maritain's theory has serious drawbacks not unrelated to the paradox just mentioned. First, it does not adequately explain how we can achieve a rational and conceptual understanding of what originally becomes known non-conceptually and non-rationally. Secondly, because Maritain's theory is based upon and is presented as an interpretation of Aquinas's theory, it is not entirely coherent to the extent that it departs from the original theory. There is indeed, according to St.

Thomas, such a thing as knowledge by which man is ordered to an end connatural to him through a natural inclination. But that inclination is first and foremost the inclination of *reason itself*, where reason is said to contain the first and universal principles of the natural law.[8] Aquinas teaches that the inclinations of the non-rational parts of human nature belong to the natural law only in a secondary sense and as it were by participation, inasmuch as they arise from the law contained in reason which rules and measures them.[9] Maritain, however, by making inclinations of the affective and volitional powers the measure of reason's knowledge, reverses Aquinas's order in which reason is the rule and measure of the inclinations of other parts of human nature. What Maritain calls the affective inclinations belong to what Aquinas calls the sensitive appetites,[10] and the will is what Aquinas calls the rational appetite.[11] Insofar as those appetites are, in Maritain's estimation, the guiding source of reason's knowledge of the natural law, reason is left with no independent basis for evaluating and choosing among the appetites. Moreover, in saying that inclinations of the appetites are the source of our apprehension of the good, Maritain fails to observe the distinction Aquinas makes between appetitive powers and apprehensive or cognitive powers.[12] Finally, Maritain supposes that desire for the good, as manifest in the inclinations of the appetites, precedes and indeed causes reason's knowledge of the good that is to be pursued. For Aquinas, however, knowledge of the good is a precondition for love, and apprehension of the good always precedes desire.[13]

## REASON'S PLACE IN MARITAIN'S THEORY

Maritain at one point says that the natural law depends only on *Divine* reason, and that human reason has no part in causing the natural law to exist, or even in causing it to be known.[14] However, he is not entirely consistent in that regard. There are other passages in which he grants *pre-conscious* or *unconscious* human reason a role as a secondary cause that helps to form the inclinations that make the natural law known. Maritain describes pre-conscious reason not so much as a cognitive power, but rather as a dynamic force involving "immersed notions," "centers of organization" and "irradiations," that takes the purely instinctual inclinations of man's animal nature and transforms them into the properly human and rational inclinations.[15] He says that the inclinations of the human order are "the result of the transmutation of pre-existing tendencies when they are transferred to a higher sphere, where the make-up of the psyche receives the form and irradiations of reason."[16]

The idea of pre-conscious reason as an active force that transforms the inclinations is unique to Maritain – or at least it is not found in the texts of Aquinas, for whom reason is always an apprehensive power.[17] There is, however, in Aquinas's teaching, a place for an implicit and informal operation of reason[18] which precedes a formal scientific judgment involving a resolution or analysis back to first principles.[19] Ralph McInerny gives the

example of children who argue whether something is or is not; they assume the principle of non-contradiction as their premise, but the premise is self-evident and taken for granted so that they never have to explicitly state it or identify it.[20] In a text in which Aquinas says that even belief or opinion which falls short of *scientia* is in some way caused by self-evident first principles, he says that such belief or opinion may follow from an argument proposed by another that "does not make it clear that [first principles] are included" ("includi non manifestantur").[21] He thus implies that there is a less than clear apprehension, one might say an informal and implicit understanding, of first principles, that causes opinion. But such a formation of opinion still involves the operation of reason as an apprehensive power that moves from principles to conclusions in a conscious mind, although in a way below the level of explicit awareness. It does not involve reason as a dynamic force that forms appetitive inclinations without our being conscious of it.

In addition to the operation of pre-conscious reason, Maritain also grants that the *conscious and conceptual* operation of human reason comes into play at a later stage, when moral philosophy analyzes the moral standards and rules of conduct that were initially discovered in a non-rational and non-conceptual manner, and roots out any errors that may have crept in.[22] The rational and conceptual discipline of moral philosophy is said to have its foundation in metaphysics.[23] And metaphysics, according to Maritain, does not depend upon knowledge acquired through connaturality or inclination. Instead, "it proceeds purely by way of conceptual and rational knowledge."[24] "It is absolutely necessary," says Maritain, "to have recourse to metaphysics if we want to justify the real, objective validity of moral norms and values."[25]

Maritain, in fact, posits a few different modes of moral and legal knowledge which include the non-conceptual mode of the natural law, the conceptual mode of moral philosophy, and the conceptual mode of the law of nations.[26] He distinguishes the law of nations from moral philosophy, for he says that the latter is a subsequent reflection upon both the law of nations and the natural law.[27] He is faithful to Aquinas in saying that the law of nations or *ius gentium* consists of secondary precepts which are rationally derived as conclusions from first and general principles of the natural law (*ST* I-II, q. 95, aa. 2 and 4). But, in addition to the conceptual derviation of the law of nations, Maritain also proposes that secondary precepts are derived by inclination.[28] He says that, "certain regulations which are based upon human nature, and which are connected necessarily with the first principle: 'Do good and avoid evil,' may be known on the one hand through inclination (in which sense they belong to the Natural Law), and on the other hand through the conceptual exercise of reason (in which sense they belong to the law of nations)."[29]

## THE SCOPE OF THE NATURAL LAW AS COMPARED TO CONCEPTUAL MORAL KNOWLEDGE

Aquinas speaks of a number of self-evident first principles or precepts of the natural law that are known to all, and which have a common foundation in the principle that good shall be done and pursued and evil avoided.[30] For example, the precept "love your neighbour as yourself," sometimes understood more narrowly as "one should do evil to no other" or as "avoid offending others," is a self-evident and indemonstrable first principle of the natural law.[31] According to Aquinas, the underived first principles are not included in the law of nations, for the law of nations consists only of secondary precepts that are derived as *conclusions* (*ST* I-II, q. 95, a. 4). Maritain can be understood to follow Aquinas in holding that there are primary precepts of the natural law that are not included in the law of nations. For example, Maritain does not say that the natural law precept "Do nobody evil," belongs to the law of nations, although he says that prohibition of murder is part of the law of nations inasmuch as it is derived as a *conclusion* from "Do nobody evil."[32]

Maritain does not, however, limit the scope of *moral philosophy* to conclusions drawn from prior premises. Since he says that moral philosophy reflects upon the natural law as well upon the law of nations, he implies that it reflects upon the primary precepts of natural law from which the law of nations is derived. Moreover, Maritain says that the inclinations cannot be invoked as proof by moral philosophy.[33] Therefore, if he were to hold that a precept such as "Do nobody evil" could *only* be known through inclination, it would follow that it could not be proved. If so, then all of the secondary precepts that might rationally follow from it, including the prohibition of murder, would be without a foundation acceptable to moral philosophy. Hence, if we suppose that Maritain believes that the precepts of moral philosophy are securely grounded, we must also assume that he holds that all of the content of the natural law – including its most basic principles – can be apprehended or proved conceptually by moral philosophy in some way that is not wholly dependent on the affective and volitional inclinations.

Although we might safely assume that Maritain holds that all of the content of the natural law can also be known by moral philosophy, the converse is not true. Maritain says that certain norms or regulations that can be rationally and conceptually deduced from the natural law, and which he says are part of the law of nations, are *not* part of the natural law because they cannot be known by inclination. As examples of the latter, he gives "Do not condemn anyone without a hearing" and "Treat prisoners of war humanely."[34]

In sum, the natural law, inasmuch as it is defined by Maritain as moral precepts that are known connaturally through inclination, is a subset of a larger group of moral and legal precepts and regulations, and is distinguished not by its content but rather by its mode of knowledge.

Moreover, Maritain seems to imply that all the moral and legal precepts and regulations that are known non-conceptually as part of the natural law can also be known rationally and conceptually by moral philosophy. But if that is so, why do we need the natural law?

## THE NATURAL LAW AS A NECESSARY SUPPLEMENT TO MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Two reasons may be given as to why the natural law, as it is conceived by Maritain, is needed as a supplement to moral philosophy. One reason is that it provides an explanation for the moral knowledge of the ordinary person. According to Aquinas, the first precepts of the natural law are universal principles that are known by everyone (*ST* I-II, q. 93, a. 2; q. 94, a. 4). Rousseau, on the other hand, in speaking of the natural law theories of the eighteenth century, observes that "all of them base it on such metaphysical principles that, even among us, there are very few people capable of understanding these principles, let alone capable of discovering them on their own."[35] In our own time, Alasdair MacIntyre has asked how those who would derive the precepts of the natural law from metaphysics might explain how "plain persons" are able to know those precepts.[36] Maritain's theory of knowledge through inclination has the advantage of addressing the concern raised by Rousseau and MacIntyre. While not everyone has knowledge of metaphysics, which according to Aquinas is the last science in the order of learning,[37] we all share the inclinations of the appetites which Maritain says are the source of our knowledge of the natural law. Maritain himself says that the mode of inclination enables the "common man" to make judgments of ethical value.[38]

A second reason for saying that the natural law is necessary may be found in passages where Maritain locates the beginnings of moral philosophy – as well as the starting points for deduction of the law of nations – in the inclinations. He says that the natural moral experience of humanity is presupposed by moral philosophy, and that the philosopher discovers the law in that natural experience, not as a "revelation from pure reason" as he says is the case with Kantian ethics.[39] He also says that the inclinations "supply precious empirical material" to moral philosophy,[40] and describes moral philosophy as "a sort of after-knowledge" that arises after the natural law has been discovered through inclination.[41] He thus implies that knowledge through inclination or connaturality is an indispensable precondition for all of our knowledge of moral philosophy. We will see later on that Maritain is not entirely consistent in this respect. But for now, let us proceed to examine the way in which he says that the inclinations of the appetites precede and give rise to conscious reason's apprehension of the concepts of moral philosophy, as well as the way in which those inclinations may be said to guide and direct reason in its knowledge of the natural law.

## THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE NATURAL LAW AND CONCEPTUAL MORAL KNOWLEDGE

Before looking at Maritain's teaching in more detail, it might be noted in passing that the distinction he makes between the natural law and moral philosophy has no place in Aquinas's philosophical understanding. There is nothing in Aquinas's teaching that would suggest that our knowledge of the natural law is non-conceptual. Aquinas describes the precepts of the natural law as self-evident principles (*principia per se nota*) of practical *reason* (*ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2). He thus implies that they are conceptual, because he never speaks of a non-conceptual principle of reason.[42] Since the natural law can be expressed in words, it must be known conceptually, because Aquinas says that words signify conceptions of the intellect.[43] Therefore, the notion of non-conceptual knowledge of the natural law is problematical insofar as Maritain claims to present an interpretation of Aquinas's theory.

Let us nevertheless consider how we are to understand Maritain's claim that conceptual knowledge of the law and of moral philosophy in some sense arises from non-conceptual knowledge by inclination. The link between the inclinations and conceptual knowledge could be understood in two ways. In one way, the inclinations might be understood as an occasion for conceptual knowledge, but not as its source. It may thus be thought that although the conscious and rational reflections of the moral philosopher are in some way triggered by knowledge through inclination, the philosopher's conceptual knowledge is actually founded upon and derived from an independent source, e.g. from the principles of metaphysics. Such an explanation is suggested by Maritain when he says that moral philosophy must establish itself on metaphysical foundations,[44] and when he says that metaphysics, is the discipline which enables an analysis and critique of knowledge through connaturality.[45] In the fifth lesson of his posthumously published lectures on the natural law (*La Loi Naturelle*), he says that inasmuch as moral truths are acquired by rational investigation, they do *not* take part in the natural law according to the mode of inclination, but instead bring in the "ontological contents" of the natural law.[46] Maritain sometimes speaks of the ontological element of the natural law as opposed to the gnoseological (i.e. epistemological) element.[47] The ontological element refers to the grounding of the natural law in the normality of the functioning of the human essence.[48] The gnoseological element refers to the mode of knowledge through inclination. In saying that rational investigation brings in the ontological contents of the natural law, Maritain thus implies that it gives us a direct access to the human essence which is missing in the mode of knowledge through inclination.

Elsewhere, Maritain suggests a second way in which the inclinations might provide a basis for the concepts of moral philosophy, which is more in keeping with his claim that affective and volitional inclinations guide and direct the intellect. In speaking of the process or act whereby a philosopher makes conceptual moral judgments that conform to

inclinations that have been formed by pre-conscious reason, Maritain says that the conscious judgments of moral philosophy "will be founded" upon those inclinations.[49] Unfortunately, he does not give any further explanation of that process or act. He might be taken to suggest – although he never explicitly says – that there is a simple insight in which conscious reason somehow grasps the rational content of the inclination that was formed by the activity of pre-conscious reason.[50] If he means to say that there is such an insight, he owes us an explanation as to how such an insight takes place. For example, is an intelligible species of a moral precept abstracted from a phantasm of the inclination? Maritain does not say. Indeed, if he is correct in saying that reason in its pre-conscious operations forms the properly human inclinations, it seems odd that reason in its conscious operations must look to the sub-rational inclinations that it has formed, and not directly to itself in its own act of understanding, in order to discern the content of the natural law.

In general, Maritain needs to explain how experience of an affective or volitional inclination to act in a certain way leads to knowledge of a precept that one *ought* to act in a certain way. He never claims that is self-evident to reason that humans ought to follow all of their inclinations. Indeed, he acknowledges that we have inclinations that have not been transformed by pre-conscious reason, such as the inclination to murder, and which obviously should not be followed.[51] Therefore, Maritain has no ground for inferring from the mere fact that one has an affective or volitional inclination that one ought to follow it.[52] He does not adequately explain how the "is" of an inclination experienced as an attraction to or desire for something can account for the "ought" of a precept of natural law or moral philosophy. Nor does he explain how reason is supposed to distinguish between good inclinations and disordered inclinations if reason depends upon the guidance of those very inclinations for its knowledge of good and evil. He therefore falls short of explaining how the precepts of the natural law are made intelligible to reason, particularly in reason's conscious and conceptual operations.

Maritain not only claims that the natural law is non-conceptual so far as it is contained in affective and volitional inclinations. He sometimes says that even practical *reason*'s apprehension of principles of the natural law is non-conceptual.[53] But he also says that the precepts of the law of nations are known by a *conceptual* exercise of reason in being deduced from principles of the natural law.[54] We thus find another manifestation of the paradox at the heart of Maritain's theory. In effect, he claims that reason operating *conceptually* deduces conclusions from principles that it apprehends *non*-conceptually. However, a logical and conceptual deduction is one that begins from premises that are themselves expressed as or in terms of concepts. Maritain fails to explain how non-conceptual principles of the natural law – assuming that there are such principles – could be starting-points for reason's conceptual operations, for he never explains

how non-conceptual knowledge of the natural law is translated into conceptual knowledge.

It was stated earlier that Maritain is not entirely consistent in saying or implying that knowledge through inclination precedes and is a precondition for conceptual knowledge of morality. In the sixth lesson of his lectures on the natural law, Maritain concedes that the first principle of practical reason – that good is to be done and evil avoided – might only be known conceptually and *not* through inclination.[55] In his *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Maritain makes the same point unequivocally by including "good is to be done, evil is to be avoided" among the propositions that he says are *per se nota*, meaning that they are self-evident or known in virtue of the notions or concepts they contain.[56] In other words, he admits that the first principle of practical reason is known conceptually in the same way as first speculative principles are known.[57] Since, however, he defines the natural law as those precepts that are known non-conceptually by inclination, it follows that what Aquinas identifies as the first precept of the natural law (*ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2) may not belong to what Maritain calls the natural law. Indeed, Maritain sometimes calls the first practical principle a preamble to the natural law, from which the law follows in a necessary fashion, rather than part of the law itself.[58] Maritain thus identifies a conceptual moral principle which precedes and is a precondition for all of our non-conceptual knowledge through inclination.

## METAPHYSICS AS A FOUNDATION FOR MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Let us now consider the issue of whether or not moral philosophy can find its ground in metaphysics. While it may be granted that metaphysics reflects upon the findings of moral philosophy after they have been articulated by moral philosophers, Maritain's claim that metaphysics serves as a *foundation* for moral philosophy is not so easily granted. It has already been noted that, according to Aquinas, metaphysics is the last science in the order of learning. Therefore, in the Thomistic order, the foundational principles of ethics or moral philosophy must be accessible to those who have not yet studied metaphysics. Moreover, Maritain himself offers little in the way of explanation of how metaphysics, or any other form of rational inquiry that does not depend upon appetitive inclinations for guidance and direction, might be able to know the norm by which it judges the moral value of those inclinations.[59] What he does say is that moral values belong to a distinct realm, a "universe of freedom," that is founded upon but irreducible to nature.[60] He goes on to say that the "intelligible object" that is the criterion of moral good and evil is none other than reason, in some relation to the First Cause and the eternal law.[61] Lacking in Maritain's account is an explanation of the sense in which reason can be understood as an intelligible object, and how it is made known as such to humans through rational inquiry.

**CONCLUSION**

I am not the first to notice that Maritain's theory of knowledge of the natural law differs significantly from Aquinas's.[62] In response to Maritain's claim that the will is the measure of the truth of the practical intellect in proposing the ends of action, Lawrence Dewan has this to say:

> The ends are proposed by reason, taken as prior to will. The appetite does not prescribe or propose the end. Rather, it tends toward the end prescribed by natural reason. Natural reason is prior to appetite. Thus, I maintain that Maritain is making the will do something that it cannot and should not be asked to do.[63]

If Fr. Dewan correctly interprets Aquinas, as I believe he does, in saying that natural reason is prior to appetite, then it must follow that natural reason is prior to the affective or sensitive appetites, as well being prior to the will.

But from the fact that Maritain's theory differs from Aquinas's, it does not necessarily follow that Maritain's theory is false. It does, however, follow that Maritain does not offer an accurate interpretation of Aquinas's theory. He significantly departs from Aquinas by assigning a cognitive function to the appetites.[64] Insofar as Maritain remains a Thomist, but seeks to engraft an alien teaching onto the tree of Thomism, one must reluctantly conclude that his doctrine proves to be incoherent. We find this incoherence in the paradox mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Moreover, it has been shown that Maritain is at a loss to explain how the natural law becomes intelligible to conscious and conceptual reason.

Let me end by emphasizing that Maritain is correct in saying that the natural law is known through inclination, except for the fact that he looks to the inclinations of the appetites rather than to the governing inclination, that of reason itself. As an alternative to Maritain's theory of knowledge, I propose that we turn to a literal reading of the texts of St. Thomas, including those which say that the natural law is innate and implanted by God or nature in the human mind.[65] Conceptual knowledge of first principles of the natural law is part of our original equipment.[66] Aquinas says that the natural law is habitually present even in the minds of infants who, because of a deficiency of their age, cannot actually consider it.[67] However, a more thorough account of Aquinas's theory, and a justification of a literal reading of the texts to which I have referred, must wait for another day.

**APPENDIX**

***Abbreviations – Works of St. Thomas Aquinas***

(See Bibliography for English Translations)

| | |
|---|---|
| *De ver.* | *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* |
| *In De Trin.* | *Super Boetium De Trinitate* |
| *In Eth.* | *Sententia libri Ethicorum* |
| *In Lib. de caus.* | *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Super librum de causis* |
| | |
| *In Post. an.* | *Expositio Libri Posteriorum* |
| *In Sent.* | *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* |
| *SCG* | *Summa contra gentiles* |
| *ST* | *Summa theologiae* |

**NOTES**

[1] See Iain Benson, "Notes towards a (Re) Definition of the 'Secular,'" *U.B.C. Law Review* 33 (2000): 520. "Parse historically the word 'secular' and one finds that secular means something like non-sectarian or focused on this world, not 'non-faith.'"

[2] I have defended Maritain's theory of natural rights in "Jacques Maritain and Natural Rights: The Priority of Metaphysics over Politics," *Études maritainiennes – Maritain Studies* 21 (2005): 122-32.

[3] This paper is for the most part based upon and is presented as an abbreviated version of the second chapter of my dissertation, "Thomas Aquinas and Knowledge of the First Principles of the Natural Law" (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 2007).

[4] *La Loi Naturelle ou Loi non Écrite*: texte inédit, établi par Georges Brazzola, in vol. 16 of *Jacques et Raïssa Maritain: Oeuvres Complètes* (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1999), 814-16. *La Loi Naturelle*, as I will refer to it, was originally published as a monograph (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1986), but the earlier edition will not be cited herein. I will cite *Oeuvres*, 16, followed by page numbers. Brazzola's introduction to *La Loi Naturelle*, at *Oeuvres*, 16, 689-91 explains how it came to be assembled after Maritain's death. *La Loi Naturelle* has in English been referred to as *Lectures on Natural Law* by William Sweet in "Persons, Precepts and Maritain's Account of the Universality of Natural Law," *Études maritainiennes – Maritain Studies* 14 (1998): 141-65.

[5] *Oeuvres*, 16, 822-23. After saying that St. Thomas gives only one example of a principle equally known to everyone that applies in all circumstances, "agir conformément à la raison" (822), Maritain explains on the next page that the precepts of the natural law are only precepts and only oblige us insofar as they conform to reason. See also Sweet,"Persons,

Precepts and Maritain's Account of the Universality of Natural Law," 165, final paragraph.

[6] "On Knowledge through Connaturality," *The Review of Metaphysics* 4 (1951), 474; the same essay is reprinted in *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), but the original will be cited herein. See also *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 91-92, where Maritain says that "the intellect, in order to bear judgment, consults and listens to the inner melody that the vibrating strings of abiding tendencies make in the subject."

[7] "On Knowledge through Connaturality," 479: ". . . no conceptual and rational exercise of human reason intervenes in its knowledge of Natural Law, so that human reason knows Natural Law, but has no part, either in causing it to *exist*, or even in causing it *to be known*." See also *Oeuvres*, 16, 816-19.

[8] *ST* (*Summa Theologiae*; a list of abbreviations of Thomas's works is included in the Appendix at the end of the text of this paper, and my bibliography which follows these notes refers to the translations of Thomas's works which are cited and quoted herein) I-II, q. 62, a. 3: "As stated above (a. 1), the theological virtues direct man to supernatural happiness in the same way as by the natural inclination man is directed to his connatural end. Now the latter happens in respect of two things. First, in respect of the reason or intellect, in so far as it contains the first universal principles which are known to us by the natural light of the intellect, and which are reason's starting-point, both in speculative and in practical matters. Secondly, through the rectitude of the will which tends naturally to good as defined by reason." The first principles in practical matters are, of course, the first precepts or principles of the natural law (*ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2). And we see that, in q. 94, a. 2, Aquinas refers to man's "inclination to the good, according to the nature of his reason." As to how first principles of natural law come to be contained in human reason, see *ST* I-II, q. 90, a. 4, ad 1: "The natural law is promulgated by the very fact that God instilled it into man's mind so as to be known by him naturally."

[9] *ST* I-II, q. 90, a. 1, ad 1: "Since law is a kind of rule and measure, it may be in something in two ways. First, as in that which measures and rules: and since this is proper to reason, it follows that, in this way, law is in the reason alone. Secondly, as in that which is measured and ruled. In this way, law is in all those things that are inclined to something by reason of some law: so that any inclination arising from a law, may be called a law, not essentially but by participation as it were. And thus the inclination of the members to concupiscence is called 'the law of the members.'" *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2, ad 2: "All the inclinations of any parts whatsoever of human nature, e.g. of the concupiscible and irascible parts, in so far as they are ruled by reason, belong to the natural law, and are reduced to one first precept, as stated above: so that the precepts of the natural law are many in themselves, but are based on one common foundation."

[10] See *ST* I-II, q. 22, a. 2 s.c., where the passions of the soul are said to be the same as affections, which are appetitive not apprehensive, and q. 23, a.4, in which the sensitive appetites are said to comprise all of the passions of the soul. Q. 22, a. 2 s.c. reads in part: ". . . the passions of the soul are the same as affections. But affections manifestly belong to the appetitive, and not to the apprehensive part. Therefore the passions are in the appetitive rather than in the apprehensive part."

[11] *ST* I-II, q. 26, a. 1: "Again, there is another appetite following freely from an apprehension in the subject of the appetite. And this is the rational or intellectual appetite, which is called the 'will.'"

[12] See, for example, *ST* I, q. 64, a. 2; q. 80, a. 1; *ST* I-II, q. 22, a. 2, s.c. (as quoted, *supra*); q. 28, aa. 2, 3; q. 33, a. 1.

[13] *ST* I-II, q. 27, a. 2: "I answer that, as stated above (a. 1), good is the cause of love, as being its object. But good is not the object of the appetite, except as apprehended. And therefore love demands some apprehension of the good that is loved. For this reason the Philosopher (Ethic. ix, 5,12) says that bodily sight is the beginning of sensitive love: and in like manner the contemplation of spiritual beauty or goodness is the beginning of spiritual love. Accordingly knowledge is the cause of love for the same reason as good is, which can be loved only if known." For further references and commentary on the relationship of apprehension and appetite, see the discussion of passion and action in Kevin White, "The Passions of the Soul, Ia IIae, qq. 22-48," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 105-06.

[14] "On Knowledge through Connaturality," 479-80.

[15] *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, tr. Cornelia N. Borgerhoff (Albany, N.Y.: Magi Books, 1990), 57. This work was originally published as *Neuf Leçons sur les Notions Premières de la Philosophie Morale* (Paris: Pierre Tequi, 1950). See also "On Knowledge through Connaturality," 478, where Maritain speaks of "reason-permeated inclinations" which have been "refracted through the crystal of reason in its unconscious or pre-conscious life."

[16] *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 57.

[17] *ST* I, q. 81, a. 1, ad 2; q. 83, a. 4; I-II, q. 13, a. 1; q. 17, a. 8.

[18] John F. Wippel, in *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 35-49, makes a distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge in Aquinas's general theory of knowledge. This distinction will be discussed in the next footnote.

The distinction between implicit and informal reasoning on the one hand and explicit and explicit and formal reasoning on the other was developed by John Henry Newman, although not in the context of a study of Aquinas or discussion of self-evident first principles. Newman's distinction nevertheless assists us in understanding Aquinas's theory in which our

reasoning begins from first principles that we consider actually, although most of us never have cause to explicitly identify them. See Newman's Sermon XI, "The Relationship of Faith to Reason," and Sermon XIII, "Explicit and Implicit Reason," in *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1898). The theme of implicit reasoning was developed further by Newman in his *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), where he calls the ability to reason informally "the illative sense." (The publication dates of the editions I have cited are not the dates of writing; the *Grammar of Assent* was completed about 1870 and the sermons were written earlier.) In Sermon XIII, Newman explains that the implicit process results in the beliefs and conclusions upon which we act, and that it does not require clearness in argument or accuracy in stating doctrines or principles. The explicit analysis which may follow is not, according to Newman, necessary to make the original inference rational, nor to make the conclusion correct. It only gives an account, and a sustained consciousness of the reasoning process.

[19] See the Foreword of St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics of Aristotle*, tr. F.R. Larcher (Albany, New York: Magi Books Inc., 1970), 2: "Now the part of logic which is devoted to the [process which induces necessity] is called the *judicative* part, because it leads to judgments possessed of the certitude of science. And because a certain and sure judgment touching effects cannot be obtained except by analyzing them into their first principles, this part is called *analytical*, i.e. resolvent." See also *De ver.*, q. 15, a. 1 and *ST* I, q. 79, a. 8 for an account of how reason begins from an understanding of first principles in the process of discovery (*inventio*) and returns to them by analysis (*resolutio*) in the process of judgment.

Wippel, in *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 35-49, reconstructs the way in which the subject of metaphysics (i.e., being as being) is "discovered" (although not in the sense of *inventio*) according to St. Thomas. Wippel refers to an initial implicit knowledge or awareness of existence itself (p. 36), which precedes the judgment that the thing exists, which in turn precedes the resolution or analysis back to the concept of being. At pp. 42-43: "For Thomas resolution is a technical expression which can be expressed in English as analysis. As he explains in his Commentary on the *De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 1, according to this procedure one may move from knowledge of something to knowledge of something else which is implied by the first but not explicitly contained in it."

[20] McInerny, *Aquinas* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press/Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 103-04.

[21] *De ver.*, q. 11, a. 1.

[22] "On Knowledge through Connaturality, 480; *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 63.

[23] *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 18-20.

[24] "On Knowledge through Connaturality," 481.

[25] *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 18.

[26] *Oeuvres*, 16, 804-04 (*Tableau* III). Also, there are determinations of positive law which are not conclusions, but are shown on *Tableau* III as derived from the natural law "Par mode de détermination contingente."

[27] Ibid., 804-05 (*Tableau* III), 808-09.

[28] Ibid., 808: "Nous avons des principes propres qui dérivent des principes communs, d'une façon nécessaire mais non conceptuelle, concrétions nécessaires des principes communs et, comme les principes communs, connues par inclination. En ce qui concerne au contraire le droit de gens, nous avons des régulations qui dérivent de la loi naturelle d'une manière nécessaire mais par ordre de conclusions conceptuellement établies."

[29] *Natural Law: Reflections on Theory and Practice*, ed. and tr. William Sweet (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 49; *Oeuvres*, 16, 734.

[30] *ST* I-II, q. 93, a. 2:"Now all men know the truth to a certain extent, as least as to the common principles of the natural law." See also *ST* I, q. 79, a. 12, ad 3 and *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2, s.c. and ad 2, and q. 94, a. 4. As to these precepts being self-evident (*per se nota*), see *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

[31] *ST* I-II, q. 100, a. 3, ad 1; q. 95, a. 2; q. 94, a. 2.

[32] *Oeuvres*, 16, 736-37; *Man and the State*, 98 n. 13.

[33] *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 63.

[34] *Natural Law: Reflections on Theory and Practice*, 50; *Oeuvres*, 16, 735.

[35] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, para. 6 of preface to *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men (Second Discourse)*, in *The First and Second Discourses and Essay on the Origin of Languages*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 131.

[36] Alasdair MacIntyre, review of *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law: An Analytic Reconstruction*, by Anthony Lisska, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (March 1997): 95-99.

[37] English translations of texts on the order of learning from *In De Trin.*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 9; *In Lib. de caus.*, lect. 1; and *In VI Eth.* lect. 7 are found in *The Division and Methods of the Sciences*, 4th ed., trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1986), 23-24 and 99-102.

[38] *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 58.

[39] Ibid., 52.

[40] Ibid., 63.

[41] "On Knowledge through Connaturality," 480.

[42] This point has been made by Gregory Doolan, "The First Principles of the Natural Law," in *Reassessing the Liberal State: Reading Maritain's "Man and the State,"* ed. Timothy Fuller and John T. Hittinger (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 133. Doolan cites *ST* I, q. 85, a.5, where he says the acts of the intellect are

described as follows: "simple apprehension whereby we form concepts; composition and division whereby we make judgments in light of these concepts, and reasoning whereby we draw conclusions from our conceptual judgments." However, Aquinas does not speak of concepts in q. 85, a. 5, except in the *sed contra*: "Words signify conceptions of the intellect" ("voces significant conceptiones intellectus"). Doolan says that since the precepts are described as "principles," they are judgments involving concepts. However, the *first* principles are not judgments, since they are known by a simple apprehension (*ST* I, q. 79, aa. 8, 12), and not by a discursive movement of reason as occurs in the case of a composition or division. But since they can be stated in words, they must involve *conceptiones intellectus* and therefore cannot be non-conceptual. Indeed, the first principles are also called *conceptiones* (*De ver.*, q. 11, aa. 1, 3).

[43] Ibid., *ST* I, q. 85, a. 5, s.c.

[44] *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 18-20, 213. After saying at p. 18, that "we must have recourse to metaphysics," Maritain at p. 19 asks, "Can we establish a moral philosophy on foundations which are properly philosophical, at once metaphysical and 'physical' (I mean amenable to the philosophy of nature)?" He proceeds to answer that St. Thomas provides us with "the keys we are looking for."

[45] "On Knowledge Through Connaturality," 481.

[46] *Oeuvres*, 16, 810 (emphasis added): "En traçant une ligne allant des principes communs (au sens absolu) de la loi naturelle jusqu'aux ultimes déterminations et découvertes de l'expérience morale et de la connaissance éthique dans l'humanité, nous réunirons dans un même ensemble toutes ces vérités morales qui, *pour autant qu'elles sont acquises par investigation rationelle*, ne font pas partie de la loi naturelle comme procédant par mode d'inclination, mais *rentrent dans son contenu ontologique*."

[47] *Man and the State*, 85-89; *Oeuvres*, 16, 702-14.

[48] *Man and the State*, 87-88: "What I am emphasizing is the first basic element to be recognized in natural law, namely the *ontological* element; I mean the *normality of functioning* which is grounded on the essence of that being: man."

[49] *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 59 (emphasis added): "In the work of philosophical reflection, in this knowledge of the second look which is moral philosophy, where reason operates in a logical and conscious way, the philosopher's reason will conform to reason acting vitally, organically, like a catalytic ferment which releases, by virtue of a preconscious notion, not made distinct in concepts, *natural inclinations on which moral judgments will be founded*. After that, once these moral judgments have been consciously made . . . "

[50] If there is such an insight, it is not what Aquinas calls a "judgment," which involves a composition or division, i.e. a movement of discursive reason as opposed to a simple act of apprehension or

understanding (*De ver.*, q. 1, a. 3; *ST* I, q. 85, a. 5). See also Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 3-4, n. 3.

[51] *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 57; *Oeuvres*, 16, 746.

[52] One might argue that an inclination of the will should be followed, since the will naturally tends to the good. But Maritain does not say that the proposition that the will tends to some good is itself a self-evident principle or that it is known through inclination. It is better characterized as a conclusion of metaphysics or moral philosophy. Moreover, there is choice in the will (*ST* I-II, q. 13, a. 1), it may tend to an apparent not a true good (q. 8, a. 1) or a partial good (q. 10, a. 2), and the will can be evil (q. 19, a. 8, s.c.). Furthermore, according to Aquinas, the inclination of the rational appetite must be preceded by reason's apprehension of the good (see *ST* I-II, q. 27, a. 2 and texts cited in the conclusion to this paper in the footnote to the quotation from Lawrence Dewan).

[53] *Oeuvres*, 16, 816 (emphasis added): "Du côté de la raison pratique, tous les principes de la loi naturelle fondeés sur le premier principe "faire le bien, éviter le mal " sont connus de soi quant à leur contenu, *non pas* en vertu des notions qui composent ou *par une appréhension conceptuelle*, mais en vertu de l'inclination naturelle que l'homme a à ses fins essentielles et par le moyen desquelles la raison connaît par inclination ce qui est bien et ce qui est mal."

[54] *Natural Law: Reflections on Theory and Practice*, 50; *Oeuvres*, 16, 735.

[55] *Oeuvres*, 16, 815-16: "Remarquons ici que ce premier principe de la raison practique peut être dit évident de soi, en raison même des concepts qui le composent – ce n'est donc pas un principe connu par inclination –, évident en raison même des concepts qui commandent tout l'ordre practique; il est la même de tout ce qui est à faire, d'être quelque chose de bien, et de tout ce qui est à éviter, d'être quelque chose de mal."

[56] *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 176-77. Maritain follows John of St. Thomas in distinguishing self-evident propositions that are "inclusive" (*per se primo modo*) and "suppositive" (*per se secundo modo*). In the former, the predicate is formally included in the notion of the subject; in the latter, the subject is included in the notion of the predicate "as its proper – appropriate and necessary – subject." Examples of *per se secundo modo* given on p. 177 are: "every nose is either snub or not snub," "every whole number is either odd or even," "every contingent being is caused," and "good is to be done, evil is to be avoided." However, Aquinas's definition in *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2 of a proposition that is *per se nota* in itself (*secundum se*) only describes the *per se primo modo*.

[57] See *Oeuvres*, 16, 806-07 and 813, where Maritain distinguishes between our knowledge of speculative principles, which are *per se nota*, and

our natural knowledge of moral principles, which are known through inclination.

[58] In *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, 62-63, and in *Man and the State*, 90, the first practical principle is said to be knowledge that we have "naturally," but is described as a preamble and *not* part of the law itself. The passage in the earlier work (*The Rights of Man and Natural Law*) says: "The only practical knowledge all men have naturally and infallibly in common is that we must do good and avoid evil. This is the preamble and principle of the natural law; it is not the law itself. Natural law is the ensemble of things to do and not to do that follow therefrom in a *necessary* fashion, and *from the simple fact that man is man*, nothing else being taken into account." In *Man and the State*, the final clause beginning "and *from the simple fact that man is man*" is deleted. It has been pointed out by Paul Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 215-17, that in Maritain's earlier work his scheme appears more "rationalistic." In *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, Maritain does not say that the knowledge all men "naturally"have of the preamble (cf. *Oeuvres*, 16: 806-07 where what is "naturally" known is through inclination), or their knowledge of the law itself, is through inclination. He simply says that the natural law is something that "reason can discover" (61). In *Man and the State*, however, he adopts the theory of knowledge through inclination (91-92).

[59] My examination of Maritain's thought on this issue, as stated in his *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, is found in my dissertation, "Thomas Aquinas and Knowledge of the First Principles of the Natural Law," 83-89.

[60] *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 73.

[61] *Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 76.

[62] See Gregory Doolan, "The First Principles of the Natural Law,"as cited above. In *Nine Modern Moralists*, Paul Ramsey contends that the rationalistic "stereotype" of the natural law "must be examined and rejected" (212). He credits Maritain with doing just that, and also says that Maritain's theory not only differs from eighteenth century rationalism, but "stands in contrast with Thomas Aquinas so far as his treatise on law alone is at issue. Plainly, Jacques Maritain is a revisionist among theorists of the natural law; and a rather radical one" (223).

[63] Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "Natural Law and the First Act of Freedom: Maritain Revisited," *Études maritainiennes/Maritain Studies* 12 (1996): 15-16. In support of his view, Dewan cites *ST* I-II, q. 19, a. 3, obj. 2 and ad 2, and II-II, q. 47, a. 6 in its entirety. Reference might also be made to *ST* II-II, q. 4, a. 7: "[T]he will has no inclination for anything except in so far as it is apprehended by the intellect" and to I-II, q. 62, a. 3 (quoted in a footnote to the first part of this paper) where it is stated that "the will tends naturally to good as defined by reason."

[64] While moral virtue, and hence right appetite, is necessary for there to be the intellectual virtue of prudence, it does not follow that the appetite performs a cognitive function by informing reason in its prudential judgments. Rather, Aquinas teaches that prudence is not possible "unless the impediment of the passions, destroying the judgment and command of prudence, be removed; and this is done by moral virtue" (*ST* I-II, q. 58, a. 5, ad 3).

[65] In regard to principles of the natural law being implanted by God or nature in human reason where they are said to pre-exist or to be innate, see, for example, *In III Sent.*, d. 33, q. 2, a. 4, qc. 4; d. 37, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3; d. 37, q. 1, a. 3; *In IV Sent.*, d. 33, q. 1, a. 1; *De ver.*, q. 10, a. 6, ad 6; q. 11, a. 1; q. 11, a. 3; q. 16, a. 1; *SCG* III, 46, n. 4; *ST* I, q. 79, a. 12; *ST* I-II, q. 90, a. 4, ad 1; q. 93, a. 2, s.c.; q. 100, a. 3; *ST* II-II, q. 47, a. 6.

[66] *De ver.*, q. 11, aa. 1, 3 (as to the first principles as first conceptions); *ST* I, q. 79, a. 12 (as to implantation of first principles of practical reason) considered actually, is in *reason*.

[67] *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 1, s.c. and ad 4. We see, in the body of q. 94, a. 1, that the habitual presence of the precepts of the natural law, i.e. when they are not considered actually, is in *reason*.

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# MORAL INTELLIGIBILITY
# AND THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY

*SHEILA MASON*

## INTRODUCTION

In his recent book, *A Secular Age*[1], Charles Taylor provides us with a rich and highly detailed description of the emergence of the secular materialistic world from the 'enchanted' worldview of previous ages. The secular worldview has now become deeply embedded in the 'social imaginary' of modernity. In these contrasting worldviews every aspect of ordinary life is experienced differently. What was completely and unquestionably taken for granted in the earlier view has become almost unimaginable in the subsequent worldview of modernity. While this remarkable transformation did not occur overnight, as he points out, it has left those whose lives are infused with the social imaginary of modernity with a permanent sense of loss[2]. This sense of loss is due to the fact that modern consciousness has arisen, in part out of a sustained rejection of the idea of God.

The aim of this paper is to describe what I take to be an emerging sensibility, a move toward a more enchanted view of the world than is possible in a predominantly scientific materialistic worldview, and to examine the way in which this modified enchantment might be made morally intelligible within the context of contemporary virtue theory.

Such an emergent sensibility appears to me to offer what might constitute a remedy for the sense of loss and disenchantment that accompanies modernity, without returning to some of the more, to modern consciousness at least, bizarre assumptions of the former 'enchanted' view of the world such as the assumption that our lives are continuously exposed to the influences of spirits both good and bad, including 'wood spirits'.[3] Intimations of this emergent sense of enchantment abound in the literature on environmental ethics, animal rights and the plight of future generations. The sense of enchantment without 'wood spirits', as it might be described, seems to be experienced by many people at the level of un-theorized consciousness. Many feel deeply moved by nature, animals, and beauty, and by particular human beings.[4] My aim is to reflect on some expressions of this consciousness and to examine the possibility inherent in contemporary virtue theory of providing a theoretical basis for this emerging sensibility.

In the first section I begin with a description of Taylor's contrast between the 'enchanted' world and the modern world and the way in which these views find expression in un-theorized experience. Two key ideas are developed in this section: the idea of the enchantment of the world and the

idea of the social imaginary. In the following section, I explore the idea of re-enchantment of the world without returning to the idea that there are spirits roaming about which affect us in various powerful ways. Evidence for this enlargement of consciousness without return to full blown 'magical thinking' abounds in the literature on the environment. The discussion of several versions of this form of enchantment will include descriptions of how these experiences affect the motivation of those who have them. Writers such as Dirk Postma, David Abrams, David Cooper, and Iris Murdoch, allude to such modified, non-magical enchantment.

Finally I describe some of the objections to the view that an important aspect of moral thinking involves the capacity to be enchanted with the world and with others. For many people imbued with the 'scientific' world view of modernity the important thing is to avoid superstition and magical thinking. For such people, appeals to the 'inner depths' or to inner life amount to serious threats to objectivity in moral thinking. Hence the sense of impoverishment or loss. These ways of not 'getting' what is enchanting are described in an influential essay entitled "Virtue and Reason," by John McDowell.[5]

## ENCHANTMENT AND THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY

Charles Taylor contrasts, at the end of his treatise on secularism, the world seen as including a transcendent reality, approachable in limited ways through religious experience, and the world of secular humanism which refuses to acknowledge such transcendence. Taylor's own view is that the religion of the God of Abraham, suitably framed so as to avoid fanaticism, is the one best suited to open us up to the this broader world. While the difference in practices implied in these worldviews is often dramatic, he holds that the real difference may not be as radical as some may think, for we all have a sense of the fullness of human life which we seek to attain. In this respect we are all responding to a sense of the transcendent, it is just that the secular humanists are 'misrecognizing it'.[6]

What was the experience of transcendence like in the West, before it waned to the point it has reached in today's materialist culture? The enchanted world that we have lost contained more than abstract, intellectually conceived moral norms. It contained "what we might call an 'ontic' component, identifying features of the world which make the norms more realizable."[7] Such a world was organized hierarchically so that the world was seen as composed of different 'orders' arranged in order of increasing value, dignity and worth. Rebellion against this order would have appeared nonsensical since the form was embedded in the order of the universe. One is reminded here of R. H. Tawney's description, in the conclusion of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, of the shock that a medieval person would have experienced in hearing the view that the economic order of society was not to be subsumed under the moral order.[8] One of the many benefits of this traditional world view was the Platonic

idea that classes rendered mutual service to one another and, most importantly, when people stood in right relation to one another, and society was properly ordered, they could then be in a position to achieve 'their highest virtue'. This would be the 'service that the whole order renders to all its members.'[9]

> But in the modern ideal, the mutual respect and service is directed towards serving our ordinary goals, life, liberty, sustenance of self and family. The organization of society … is judged not on its inherent form, but instrumentally. … What this organization is instrumental to concerns the very basic conditions of existence as free agents, rather than the excellence of virtue – although we may judge that we need a high degree of virtue to play our part in this.[10]

In the modern world, the ideals of security and prosperity eclipse the ideals of virtuous activity. And now, "once we are installed in the modern 'social imaginary', which is comprised of the ways in which we imagine our social existence, and the expectations which are normally met as well as the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations,[11] it seems the only possible one, the only one which makes sense."[12]

But what have we lost? Perhaps not as much as some dystopic writers think. Modernity brings with it new principles of sociality which take considerable time to become embedded in our social practices. One of the benefits of modernity, as Taylor has pointed out in *Sources of the Self*[13] and which re-posits in his book on secularism, *The Secular Age*, is that we are no longer oppressed by the fear of eternal damnation. We are now in a position to decide which goals to pursue "or else to find them in the depths, our depths … something we can recognize, as coming from deep within us."[14]

The problem for modern humanism was to "produce some substitute for *agape*" without, however, having "necessary truck with magic and wood spirits".[15] Platonism and Stoicism managed this by positing a cosmic order as the ultimate reference point. Modern humanism, lacking this acceptance of a transcendent order has the problem of producing a 'buffered self', one that is not 'porous' and open to the magical powers of various spirits and demons. What it lacked was "confidence in its own powers of moral ordering."[16]

Can modern humanism, now in its contemporary dress of environmentalism, animal rights activism and concern for future generations as well as its concern to eradicate world poverty, produce the requisite degree of 'enchantment' despite our training, as modern citizens, in the 'disciplines of disenchantment'?[17]

> Each of us as we grew up has had to take on the disciplines of disenchantment, and we regularly reproach each other for our

failings in this regard, and accuse each other of 'magical' thinking, of indulging in 'myth'.[18]

Taylor's concern in his chapter entitled 'The Bulwark of Belief' is to describe "our contemporary lived understanding; that is, the way we naively take things to be; what he describes as the construal we just live in, without ever being aware of it as a construal, or – for most of us – without ever even formulating it."[19] In what follows I shall argue that much of the lived understanding of environmentally concerned people and animal rights activists includes in its 'social imaginary' various degrees of enchantment with the preciousness of life and the magnificence of nature. Further, I shall argue that it is this sense of enchantment that provides us with the deep sources that we need to sustain our motivation in that face of enormous challenges, the sense of deep motivation that Taylor has called for in *Sources of the Self*, needed to preserve us from the twin vices of arrogance and despair.[20]

## A MODIFIED 'RE-ENCHANTMENT' OF THE WORLD

In a recently published book entitled *Why Care for Nature?: In Search of an Ethical Framework for Environmental Responsibility and Education*,[21] Dirk Willem Postma elucidates the idea, so prominent in discussions of the environment, of the 'intrinsic value' of nature. Arguing against prevailing anthropocentric views of environmental ethics, for an ecocentric world view, Postma asks what role the idea of the intrinsic value of nature might play in such discussions. "After all, ill-defined claims of intrinsic value are often a source of mystification".[22] Instead of relying on mystification we would do better, he argues, to talk about questions of responsibility. Instead of arguing that we are responsible to preserve what has this mysterious, intrinsic value, we would be better off "expressing the things in life we really care for" and through that expression coming to take responsibility for their preservation.[23] This is a useful strategy because instead of starting with an abstraction, a habit that Taylor considers characteristic of modern consciousness which is "very theory oriented" and which has a strong tendency to live in our head, and instead of putting trust in "disengaged understandings of experience" and relying on rational maxims,[24] Postma begins with our deepest experiences of value and places these experiences as the heart of discussions of value and responsibility.

I take this to be a move toward a re-enchantment of the world. This move is evident in countless writings on the environment such as those by Henry David Thoreau and Edward Albee, which contain exquisite descriptions of the experience of nature, to mention two almost at random. This 'move' toward enchantment can be seen in descriptions such as those by David Abram, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*,[25] when he challenges the worldview that places human beings and human rationality outside of the natural world in a relation of hierarchical superiority and distance. "Such

hierarchies are wrecked by any phenomenology that takes seriously our immediate sensory experience. For our senses disclose to us a wild-flowering proliferation of entities and elements, in which humans are thoroughly immersed."[26]

There are many authors who are now reminding us of the importance of "our forgotten contact" with the physical world.[27] Buddhist writers, such as Jon Kabatt-Zinn[28] and Joko Beck[29] make it a central feature of Buddhist practice to return to our senses and our experiences of the immediate moment whenever we find ourselves soaring off into disconnected rantings of the mind that cause us to fail to perceive our immediate situation accurately. "The minute something upsets us, we fly into our heads and try …to regain our safety by thinking." [30] Yet often the remedy is to stop the flow of thought and recrimination and return, quietly, to awareness of our sensations. The Buddhist idea, which is becoming increasingly well known in our culture, is to return to the fullness of immediate experience. "Life is unsatisfactory for most people because they are absent from their experience much of the time."[31]

Jon Kabat-Zinn, who has taught a course of meditation in a Boston hospital for many years, complains about the frenzy of a culture focused on constant consumption without the capacity to return to inner stillness, a culture of multi-tasking and endless interruption. There is, according to these authors, and many others, a precious quality of experience that is noticeable only in moments of deep stillness. Are these experiences to be dismissed as silly 'new age' fantasies, or might they be precisely the form of inwardness and depth that Charles Taylor alludes to when he recommends that we attend to 'our depths' something coming 'from deep within us'.

If we can access our 'inner depths' by stilling the mind, what would that mean? Would this be the modified return to 'enchantment' that I propose as a 'solution' to the emptiness and despair of the modern social imaginary, one that does not include magical thinking and a world of 'wood spirits' and 'myth'? In Taylor's view, the inner turn to the 'depths' of the ecological movement is a return to 'immanence.' It is the view that "rational mind has to open itself to something deeper and fuller."[32] Opening oneself to one's inner depths is not, in his view, the same as acknowledging the transcendence of religious views.

Yet we can, and do, expunge the sense of loss that Taylor associates with the rejection of religion. I think a good case can be made for the claim that opening the mind up to the 'inner depths' of experience, in contrast to confining the mind to the methods and dictates of reason is opening it to something transcendent, at least in the sense of transcending the bounds and limits of the ego. Take the view of David Cooper in his fascinating book *A Philosophy of Gardens*.[33] Cooper's aim, in this book, is to articulate the particular experience that leads some people to be passionate about gardening. Cooper contrasts the particular satisfaction that lies at the root of the experience of gardening with other aesthetic pleasures.

Gardening is different from creating art in one important respect: while it is concerned with beauty, the beauty that the passionate gardeners experience is deeply enhanced by the realization, or experience, of the "co-dependence between human endeavor and the natural world" wherein, amazingly, mysteriously, nature responds to our efforts and we cannot 'make' it happen without that responsiveness.[34]. The significance of the experience is that it is an experience of relation with, and the responsiveness of, something beyond our complete control. "The Garden [is] both a response to and an exemplification of something beyond the control and intervention of human beings."[35] The best way to characterize this experience, according to Cooper, is to see it as an epiphany, an experience in which "something 'spiritual, and possibly ineffable, 'shows itself' in sensible form, and thereby enables human beings to gain a sense and understanding of it."[36]

It is in this sense that I want to use the term 'enchantment' as a 'remedy' for the loss of meaning incurred by the modern social imaginary. The significant point in Cooper's analysis of the experience of gardening is that it represents a responsiveness to something beyond the self. This is a form of transcendence even though it is a far cry from the ideal of perfection and the demands for total transformation that we find in the gospels of Christianity.[37] My hope is that these allusions to contemporary writings might be construed as examples of a return to enchantment and to a sense of the transcendent that takes us beyond the stark materialism of our time. This is by no means the same as the idea that Taylor describes, as essential to Christianity, of "a transformation of human beings which takes them beyond or outside of whatever is normally understood as human flourishing."[38] Nevertheless experiences like these are transcendent in Taylor's sense insofar as there is "a departure from the everyday, and the contact with something greater."[39] That they do not include references to three notions of transcendence described by Taylor: a belief in a good beyond human flourishing, or the idea of a transcendent God or of a life that goes beyond our natural life[40] is beside the point which is to identify an emerging reaction to the limitations of materialism and scientific rationalism. Suffice it to say that for many environmentalists transcendence is "not off the map".[41]

I conclude this section with a quotation from Iris Murdoch which seems to fit well with the sense of preciousness described by the authors I have cited and which can be used to describe the kind of limited moral intelligibility that I am describing which makes a link between transcendence and enchantment and see these as the source of resistance to the corrosive skepticism of modernity.

> I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of 'see'; which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort. … [I]f we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about

us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. …The exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments.[42]

## OBSTACLES TO THE 'RE-ENCHANTMENT' OF THE WORLD

In this section I will presuppose that anyone reading this essay will be more than familiar with the powerful influence of scientific and technological thinking in our culture and will need no list of authors, nor salient quotations, expressing that view. What interests me here is the attempt by contemporary virtue theorists, who are well versed in the scientific ontology and epistemology of modernity and disciplined to avoid any form of careless thinking, to argue for an opening up to experience that is incompatible with these views.

The basic idea of virtue that McDowell posits is that virtue is a form of sensitivity to the salient features of a situation. This sensitivity is a form of knowledge which is experienced, not as the deliverance of a formal rule or principle applied to a given situation, but rather as the fusion of a conception of what is worth pursuing, a conception of 'how one should live', with the perception of a situation. "The sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity."[43] But what sort of perceptual capacity are we talking about here? Well it is not the kind of reasoning we are often told is at the heart of moral thinking: the weighing up of pros and cons so as to arrive at a decision or the application of a universal rule to a situation. On the contrary,

> the view of the situation that he arrives at by exercising his sensitivity is one in which some aspect of the situation is seen as constituting a reason for acting in some way: this reason is apprehended, not as outweighing or overriding any reasons for acting in other ways, which would otherwise be constituted by other aspects of the situation … but as silencing them.[44]

To see something as constituting a reason for acting requires, not, as is normally thought, the ability to cite a universal principle, but rather the ability to construe a particular situation in the light of the values to which one is committed, or, to use less contentious language, to see it in terms of one's vision of a full life. But this ability depends on the quality of one's attention and on the degree of commitment one has to the values one has come to appreciate. It is a 'deep-rooted prejudice about rationality' that makes this difficult for us to accept as an account of moral thinking. For in the now dominant view of rationality to act rationally is to be able to specify the principle upon which one is acting.[45] But this account of what the

virtuous person takes to be salient is not accessible to all who are capable of reasoning according to current standards of rationality.

What virtue theorists like McDowell are trying to put forth is a richly conceived picture of moral life and moral intelligibility that is tied to one's deepest experiences of value rather than to a 'deductive paradigm' of rationality. The phrase which I have just used, 'deepest experiences of value' is, however, somewhat misleading. A better way to put it is to say, as McDowell does, that "the issue turns on that appreciation of the particular instance whose absence is deplored in 'You simply aren't seeing it', or … 'But don't you see?'"[46]

This reconceptualization of moral understanding shifts our idea of moral intelligibility onto a different notion of rationality. To speak of virtue as 'sensitivity to salience' is not to rid moral thinking of rationality but, rather, to locate that rationality in a different form of knowledge, the knowledge that is expressed in appreciation of the particular instance, viewed in the light of the highest ideals of human fulfillment. The kind of persuasion that is at stake in making a situation morally intelligible requires skillfully characterizing features of the situation that might be missed by someone for whom the value is not particularly important. Animals who suffer untold cruelty in factory farms and slaughterhouses are often not viewed as having any moral standing and hence as not counting for anything other than market value. Yet someone who cares about animals and despises the suffering they go through at the hands of humans cannot fail to notice all the salient details of their lives in captivity.

So attempts to convince those who insist on bypassing the inner depths of genuine emotional resonance with the world are bound to fail. To those who are indifferent, this suffering is either not important or simply inevitable or, worse, simply not visible. No further thought seems necessary. It is in this sense that a 'view of how one should live is not codifiable.'[47] To see this, according to McDowell, is to experience a shift in one's entire conception of how to live. "It is not wrong to think of the virtuous person's judgments about what to do, or his actions, as explicable by interaction between knowledge of how to live and particular knowledge about the situation at hand."[48]

The significance of McDowell's re-description of moral intelligibility is that it represents a move away from the limitations of scientific rationalism as models of ethical thinking, and move toward a different kind of lived experience, the experience of attentiveness and responsiveness to objects of value that are there to be discovered and appreciated. If we take Taylor's distinction between the lived experience of the believer and that of the unbeliever[49], the lived experience McDowell describes might be said to fall on the side of the former even though it is not accompanied by religious beliefs. In both cases the lived experience is one of responding to something of worth that is outside the self.

The thought that links McDowell's characterization of the virtuous person's reasoning process with the thesis of this paper is that the response

of virtue theory to the impoverished worldview of modernity marks a turning point of ethical theory today away from the abstraction of modernity insofar as this theory can be seen as a return to enchantment with the world. To 'get' what the virtuous person sees, according to this theory, one has already to be committed to, or enchanted by, the vision of fullness that one discerns in the particular situations that make up our lives. My point is that the 'disenchantment' of the world by narrow paradigms of reason can be remedied by a 're-enchantment' of the world based on a heightened appreciation of, and commitment to, the possibilities of goodness that are there to be discovered if we only pay sufficient attention.

McDowell brilliantly sums up the idea of getting away from an excessively narrow conception of rationality in the following discussion of non-cognitivism in ethics, the current paradigm of moral unintelligibility of modernity. The non-cognitivist wants to argue that in order for a judgment to be rational it must be about how things are in an independent reality. But perceptions of salience, as described by the virtue theorist, can only occur when we have been 'brought to care about certain things; hence, ultimately, only because of certain antecedent facts about our emotional and appetitive makeup."[50] This introduces an unacceptable 'anthropocentrism' into moral perception that renders it irrational, or merely subjective, to those whose paradigm of rationality call for a detached, (read 'uncaring') view. The idea is that the perception of salience, since it is tied to what we care about, renders it 'un-objective' and hence irrational. There is no such thing as moral intelligibility, on this view, unless it issues in universal rational principles which 'any' person, suitably educated in the uses of rationality, can agree to. The perception of salience that depends upon one's capacity to care for the object perceived is dismissed as lacking the paradigmatic 'objectivity' of scientific thinking. Virtue theory, on the other hand, reinstates the importance of emotional commitment to proper seeing. Yet to say this is not to say that emotional perception is a guarantee of clarity. While having the 'right' emotions will turns out to be part of reading situations well, as we shall see shortly, to be enchanted with one's own emotions is not at all the same as to be enchanted with the possibilities of goodness in the world.

> If we resist non-cognitivism, we can equate the conceptual
> equipment that forms the framework of anything recognizable
> as a moral outlook with a capacity to be impressed by certain
> aspects of reality. But ethical reality is immensely difficult to
> see clearly. If we are aware of how, for instance, selfish
> fantasy distorts our vision we shall not be inclined to be
> confident that we have got things right.[51]

McDowell ends this sentence with a footnote to Iris Murdoch. It is this acknowledgement of Murdoch's perspective that enables me to link his argument to her recommendation that we pay attention, carefully, moment

by moment, to what is of value and thereby use this construal of virtue theory as a theoretical foundation for the view of moral intelligibility that I have described; the view, namely, that moral intelligibility, or 'getting it' is deeply tied in with our capacity to experience a 're-enchantment' of the world. To make this connection clearer we can see the turn toward enchantment in the following passages from Iris Murdoch's book, *The Idea of Perfection*.

> If a scientifically minded empiricism is not to swallow up the study of ethics completely, philosophers must try to invent a terminology which shows how our natural psychology can be altered by conceptions which lie beyond its range. It seems to me that the Platonic metaphor of the idea of the Good provides a suitable picture here.[52]

But if we are now in a modern period of disenchantment, as Taylor, proposes, the Platonic idea of the Good is inaccessible to us. Can we find something less metaphysically difficult, yet transcendent in the sense that Murdoch suggests, to enable us to 're-enchant' the world and render it morally intelligible once again? Murdoch suggests a more accessible point of entry into moral life: the experience of beauty, even though philosophers tend to avoid this term, preferring references to reason rather than to experience.

> But the implication of the experience with beauty seems to me to be something of great importance. … I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious to my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking about the other matter it seems less important.[53]

The obstacles to moral intelligibility construed as enchantment with the world that I have attempted to describe in this section stem from an over-'enchantment' with a particular, supposedly scientific idea of rationality that requires that we silence our personal experience and base our moral responses on abstractly construed general principles, or from an over-enchantment with the self. In the first case the aim is to distance ourselves from experience and in the second we are consumed by the experience of the self's desires. In contrast, the virtue theoretical approach I have adumbrated represents, to my mind, a turn away from these distortions of experience toward the deeper aspects of experience that are accessible, unproblematically, to anyone who takes the time to pay loving attention to what is there.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper I have described what I take to be an emerging sensibility among environmentalists and other contemporary writers concerned with the excesses of modern materialism and the predominance of a scientific, perhaps, pseudo-scientific, notion of rationality that excludes the uses of certain forms of experience as sources of moral intelligibility. I have framed the discussion in the terms set out by Charles Taylor who makes use of the notion of the 'disenchantment' of the world associated with modernity and who proposes a method of 're-enchantment' that is more religiously focused than I deem necessary to render morally intelligible some of possibilities for a re-enchantment of the world.

I have concluded with an attempt to underpin the concerns of these writers with reflections on contemporary virtue theory which itself rests upon the experience of 'malaise' with modernity. My hope is that these reflections on the role of a certain quality of experience in ordinary life and in ethical theory will constitute an interesting concept of moral intelligibility which serves to move us in the direction of a modest, but eminently accessible, 're-enchantment' of the world.

**NOTES**

[1] Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

[2] *A Secular Age*, 554.

[3] *A Secular Age*, 27.

[4] See, for example, the sensitive work of Dale Jamieson, in *Morality's Progress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[5] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," in *Mind, Value & Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 50-73.

[6] *A Secular Age*, 768.

[7] *A Secular Age*, 164.

[8] R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (West Drayton: Penguin, 1948), 273. "To the most representative minds of the Reformation as of the Middle Ages, a philosophy which treated the transactions of commerce and the institutions of society as indifferent to religion would have appeared, not merely morally reprehensible, but intellectually absurd."

[9] Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 166.

[10] Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 166.

[11] Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 171.

[12] Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 168.

[13] Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

[14] *A Secular Age*, 367.

[15] *A Secular Age*, 27.

[16] *A Secular Age*, 27.

[17] *A Secular Age*, 28.

[18] *A Secular Age*, 28.

[19] *A Secular Age*, 30.

[20] "High standards need strong sources. This is because there is something morally corrupting, even dangerous, in sustaining the demand simply on the feeling of undischarged obligation, on guilt, or its obverse, self-satisfaction." *Sources of the Self*, p. 516.

[21] Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer Press, 2006

[22] *Why Care for Nature?,* 106.

[23] *Why Care for Nature?*, 106.

[24] *A Secular Age*, 555.

[25] New York: Random House, 1966.

[26] Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 48.

[27] Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 49.

[28] *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (New York: Random House, 2005).

[29] Joko Beck, *Nothing Special: Living Zen* (Harper: San Francisco, 1993).

[30] Beck, *Nothing Special*, 161.

[31] Beck, *Nothing Special*, 159.

[32] *A Secular Age*, 9.

[33] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

[34] Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 145.

[35] Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 132.

[36] Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 132.

[37] *A Secular Age*, 430.

[38] *A Secular Age*, 430.

[39] *A Secular Age*, 517.

[40] *A Secular Age*, 20.

[41] *A Secular Age*, 374.

[42] *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 37.

[43] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 51.

[44] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 56.

[45] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 58.

[46] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 63.

[47] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 65.

[48] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 65.

[49] *A Secular Age*, 5.

[50] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 72.

[51] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 72.

[52] *A Secular Age*, 71.

[53] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 71.

**PART III**


**MODERN REASON AND ITS CHALLENGES**

# INTELLIGIBILITY VERSUS PROOF: PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD IN PASCAL AND DESCARTES

*LOUIS GROARKE*

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary philosophy (in both Analytical and Continental traditions) largely follows a method and approach originally introduced and championed by the modern French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes may be thought of as the founder of an "epistemological school," a philosophical orientation that focuses on the methods of proof or justification. Underlying his philosophy is a deep worry about the epistemological authority of our beliefs. This is the attitude that we cannot accept something as true without proof or argument. We cannot rely on intuition, experience, common sense, consensus, sense perception, Revelation, tradition, or past authority. The job of philosophy is to prove what is true using rigorous, mostly deductive argument. Logic is the philosopher's stone that turns base metals into gold. We begin with mere belief and, using the logical method, transform it into "justified true belief," i.e., into proper knowledge.

In the Analytic tradition, we have grown accustomed to a certain way of doing philosophy. We take it for granted that philosophy is mostly (if not entirely) about logical argument. Brian Leiter writes, "Analytic philosophy today names a style of doing philosophy, not a philosophical program or a set of substantive views. Analytic philosophers, crudely speaking, aim for argumentative clarity and precision; draw freely on the tools of logic; and often identify, professionally and intellectually, more closely with the sciences and mathematics, than with the humanities."[1] This précis may be something of a "soft sell," but it captures something undeniably true about present practices. Analytic philosophers deal in clear and precise *arguments*; they emphasize formal logic and science and view philosophy as a discipline that aims at rigorous proof and logical demonstration. At its extremes, analytic philosophers turn philosophy into a kind of abstract mathematics: symbolic, rigorous, exact, logical, and conclusive.

Leiter continues, "Although it appears to be a widespread view in the humanities that analytic philosophy is 'dead' or 'dying,' the professional situation of analytic philosophy simply does not bear this out. *All* the Ivy League universities, *all* the leading state research universities, *all* the University of California campuses, most of the top liberal arts colleges,

most of the flagship campuses of the second-tier state research universities boast philosophy departments that *overwhelmingly* self-identify as 'analytic': it is hard to imagine a 'movement' that is more academically and professionally entrenched than analytic philosophy."[2] Leiter is preaching to the choir, but whatever side one is on, the ascendancy of analytic philosophy marks the triumph of the epistemological school that derives ultimately from Descartes.

A variety of historical elements explain the prominence of this epistemological approach: a crisis of religious faith, a scientific emphasis on empirical verification, a self-conscious modernism that does everything it can to separate itself from past authority. If, however, the epistemological model is a valuable antidote to uncritical belief, it cannot stand on its own; it does not provide sufficient resources for a complete philosophy. As Descartes himself came to realize, one cannot defeat scepticism using only deductive logic. And yet the overwhelming emphasis on rigorous logical method that characterizes the epistemological school continues unabated in academic circles today. But there is another possibility.

Descartes' contemporary and often overlooked rival, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) provides a fuller account of knowledge, of human rationality, and of philosophy. Pascal has a different philosophical aim – the goal is not proof or justification but intelligibility or understanding. As much the mathematician and scientist as Descartes, Pascal leaves a prominent place for non-discursive or non-logical knowledge, what he calls "knowledge from the heart." Mostly, he writes in aphorisms, not arguments. He asserts religious, metaphysical, or ethical truths, in a flash, spontaneously, without any evident logical apparatus. We do not have to prove the correctness of Pascal's aphorisms: they ring true. The issue of logical proof or justification is not addressed. Insomuch as Pascal uses a method, it is the method of intuition or direct insight.

On a standard philosophical account, knowledge is true belief plus an account of *logos* or justification. The epistemological school tends to think of justification solely in terms of logic, but this is much too narrow. Pascal's aphorisms are justified – they are not arbitrary or unfounded – but they are justified by our general experience of the world. They are almost self-evident, not in a trivial sense – it took a remarkable mind to discover them – but once enunciated, we see *right away* that they are true. Descartes' heirs seem to assume that logical demonstration is the only or the main point in inquiry where "rationality" gets its hold. On Pascal's more intuitive account, rationality may come to the fore in the discovery of truth, not only in the logical corroboration of truth by after-the-fact propositions. There is, of course, plenty of room for logic in Pascal's philosophy. But Pascal, to a much greater extent than Descartes, understands the limitations of logical method. In elaborating his doctrine of knowledge from the heart, he sheds light on an alternative conception of philosophy. He believes that we can have a direct, alogical access to knowledge through the exercise of bare intelligence or intuition.

We might differentiate then between two ways of doing philosophy, each based on two conceptions of human rationality. The epistemological approach, historically associated with Descartes, aims at some kind of certainty. It strives toward the conclusive defeat of scepticism. The role of intuition tends to be quickly passed over; the privileged method is valid logical argument. The Pascalian approach, in contrast, aims at understanding. Pascal wants to shine a light on his own experience and the human condition generally. The human mind may use logic when the need or opportunity arises, but more fundamentally, it must rely on bare intelligence, on an intuitive (or non-logical) faculty of insight or understanding.

Needless to say, Descartes enjoys a much higher standing than Pascal in philosophical circles. One up-to-date reference work for professional philosophers, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, contains eight separate entries for "Descartes." These deal, in turn, with his mathematics, his epistemology, his ethics, his life and works, his modal metaphysics, his ontological argument, his physics, and the pineal gland. There is *no* general entry for Pascal who is only mentioned under a single heading: "Pascal's Wager." The study of Cartesian philosophy is an integral part of every undergraduate philosophy curriculum. Every philosophy major in a mainstream university will, at some point in his or her studies, examine Descartes' *Meditations* in careful detail. They will examine Descartes' work in introductory courses, as well as in courses dealing with early modern philosophy, philosophy of mind, artificial intelligence, logic, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science and/or philosophy of religion. And there may be higher-level courses that focus exclusively on Cartesian themes or individual texts. In the standard curriculum, philosophy lecturers might mention Pascal, in passing, in a course in Continental Philosophy as one of the forerunners of modern Existentialism. They might discuss his famous "wager" in a course in philosophy of religion, in logic, or in game theory. In most North American universities, however, any serious study of Pascal's thoughts will be found in French literature courses and taught as part of a modern languages program.

If, however, Pascal's intuitive approach seems novel, he is, in fact, a representative of a more traditional way of doing philosophy. What Pascal calls "knowledge of the heart" is that non-discursive cognitive activity or a faculty referred to by historical philosophers by terms such as: *noesis*, *intellectus*, *intelligentia*, intuition, the natural light of reason, understanding, or insight. Traditional philosophers did not feel the need to prove the existence of intelligence. They were impressed, even amazed, at the scope of human perspicuity. (Even the mental gymnastics of the radical sceptic are a testimony to human cleverness.) Ultimately, it is the power of intelligence that makes both intuitive and logical knowledge possible, that is behind the kind of knowledge Pascal associates with the heart and the kind of knowledge the epistemological tradition cherishes.

Imagine someone walking through a dark space with a flashlight. An epistemological enthusiast might demand proof: prove to me you have a flashlight; maybe you are dreaming, maybe there is an evil demon? But for someone like Pascal, this is just diversion. We know we have a light; we are holding it in our hands. The point is not to waste time trying to prove the unproveable to the unconvinceable. The point is to use the flashlight to *see* in the darkness. The point is to understand. This is what Pascal is about: trying to make sense of human experience in the light of bare intelligence.

Intelligence discovers the world. It makes sense of what it sees. Proof is irredeemably after the fact. We begin with an understanding, then we prove that this understanding is true. But we must already understand before we construct a logical proof. A contemporary emphasis on logic (and in particular on the deductive and formal aspects of logic) disguises and obscures the initial activity of bare intelligence that makes sense of the world. Intelligibility begins with intuition, i.e., with non-discursive reason. Consulting Pascal can helps us find a way back to mainstream traditional philosophy.

As a religious believer, Pascal is open to the possibility of truth that is beyond or "beside" argument. He separates the issue of proof from the issue of truth. The point is not to prove but to know; hence the shift from logical demonstration to knowledge from the heart. Of course, we can know that something is true through inference, through argument, as the epistemological school staunchly maintains. But we can also know that some things are true immediately, without logical proof, as in the case of truths embodied in aphorism. In developing an adequate picture of the world, we must ultimately rely on direct bare intelligence, on illumination as well as inference. (Although Descartes is less candid about the limitations of his own deductive approach, even he cannot do without illumination; hence his doctrine of the natural light of reason.)

This is not to suggest that there is no need for proof, for rigorous logical demonstration in philosophy. But logic is derivative. The activities of inferring conclusions from premises, of amassing evidence to support a theory, of formulating a proof of something, these are only more specialized aspects of human rationality. Everything depends ultimately on intelligence, which begins in intuition. As those who inherited the Cartesian mind-set belatedly came to realize, once we question basic human intelligence, scepticism inevitably ensues. Logic itself is open to question. Pascal's intelligibility account of philosophy is useful for it sheds light on this particular facet of human knowledge.

## PASCAL AND DESCARTES

Although important scholars (notably Ian Hacking) obscure the difference between authors such as Descartes and Pascal, a more thorough investigation will help to bring into focus the radical nature of Pascal's epistemology. Allan Bloom draws a sharp contrast: "Every Frenchman is

born, or at least early on becomes, Cartesian or Pascalian."[3] Bloom intends his statement as an exclusive disjunction. One must choose between Pascal and Descartes. In other words, one must choose between the religious and the secular, between faith and reason, between Roman Catholicism and the Enlightenment, between passion and clarity. As we shall see, there is an important kernel of truth in Bloom's contrast.

Certainly, Pascal saw things Bloom's way. In his *Pensées*, he writes: "Descartes useless and uncertain."[4] This is a damning dismissal. If, however, Pascal is opposed to the narrowness of the Cartesian approach, it is not, as is commonly supposed, that Pascal is a complete sceptic. Quite to the contrary. What Pascal attacks is a resolute (or one-sided) emphasis on reasoning understood as a serial chain of inference. He objects to what he sees as Descartes' excessive fondness for the deductive method; he opposes a kind of logicism, the idea or attitude that deductive logic is the only genuine source of insight, truth, or justification. He objects to a very narrow account of rationality, not to reason itself.

The Cartesian turn represents a shift in focus, a deliberate, if not self-conscious attempt, to build up a philosophical system with the tools of logic, to construct a bulwark against scepticism. The idea is to build up a complete worldview, founded on nothing but self-explanatory first principles, constructed with the bricks and mortar of deductive reasoning. Pascal's so-called scepticism is only the traditional recognition that we need more than logic if we are to elaborate a complete worldview. Logic, *by itself*, cannot provide a complete proof of anything.

Pascal comments, "The Pyrrhonists [Sceptics] who have only reason as the object of their attack are working ineffectually. We know we are not dreaming, however powerless we are to prove it by reason. This powerlessness proves only the weakness of reason, not the uncertainty of our entire knowledge as they claim."[5] If reason (understood as logical argument) cannot prove first principles, "this powerlessness should only serve to humiliate reason, which would be the judge of everything, not to attack our certainty."[6]

Pascal does not denigrate the role of discursive reason or formal logic. After all, he was himself an accomplished mathematician. He believes that we need reason understood as logical argument; indeed, most of our knowledge comes through argument. But Pascal envisions a more modest role for formal logic. Our inevitable dependency on logic is a symptom of our epistemological limitations rather than an expression of our most developed capacities. His position resembles that of Thomas Aquinas: if we did have superior intelligence (like Thomas' angels), we would not have to reason things out; we could do away with arguments; we could immediately discern what the truth is. Pascal writes, "Would to God that we never needed [logical argument] and that we knew everything through instinct and feeling! But nature has denied us this benefit: on the contrary it has given us very little [intuitive] knowledge. All the other kinds can only be acquired through reason."[7] Reason, understood as a capacity for logical argument,

has a role to play, but it is not the origin and foundation of either knowledge or philosophy.

Descartes' philosophical project makes a self-conscious break with the past. He aims to elaborate an all-encompassing, logically coherent system that can be used rigorously and mechanically to deduce all the truths about reality. Although contemporary scholar Ian Hacking identifies Leibniz as the progenitor of this sort of thinking, Descartes initiates the project.[8] His use of deductive argument epitomizes a modern rationalism that would, in effect, reduce philosophy to epistemology and logic. This is the attitude that we should not accept the truth of a claim unless we can prove – i.e., logically demonstrate – that it is true. Descartes himself never suggests that self-explanatory first principles require proof. If, however, Pascal believes that there is a wider range of directly-evident truths and that can be accessed independently of any formal system, Descartes' disciples want to find those very, very few self-explanatory principles that can function as axioms in the construction of a complete formal system. It is not that Descartes leaves no place for intuition. As we shall see, intuition plays an important role in Descartes' methodology. Nonetheless, the focus is elsewhere. What most impresses Descartes is the way our ideas are inextricably chained together in a sequence of logical necessity. He demonstrates unbounded enthusiasm for the deductive method. It is the emphasis on logical demonstration that drives his philosophical project.

In the foreword to his unfinished dialogue *La Recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle*, Descartes can hardly contain his enthusiasm. He writes, "ideas that do not surpass the limits of human intelligence are all enchained with such a marvellous link, and can be drawn one from another by consequences that are so necessary, that we do not need too much skill or capacity to find them, provided that having begun with the simplest notions, we know how to lead ourselves by degree until we reach the most elevated ideas of all."[9]

Descartes is an epistemological/scientific optimist. He thinks that if we are patient and methodical enough, we can use logic to rigorously solve most philosophical problems. The protagonist of this dialogue, Eudoxe (Greek for good opinion), reassures his interlocutors that discovering truths "is not as difficult as you believe, because all truths follow from one another. ... The whole secret is to begin with the first and simplest propositions and to then elevate ourselves little by little and as if by degrees until we arrive at the most distant and sophisticated truths."[10]

This then is the Cartesian method favoured by the epistemological school. It is a logical method of serial inference that may begin with an intuition, but which operates according to a mental movement that is properly logical. We begin with the most apparent truths and pull ourselves up the ladder of knowledge from premise to premise until we arrive at a conclusion. Descartes, the logician, focuses on the way in which we infer ideas from other ideas in a continuous stepwise process. He believes that we can use logic to climb up (or down) a lattice-work of logically necessary

ideas until we arrive at the most recondite conclusions. This is *le thème clé*, the linchpin idea, in all of Descartes' epistemological work.

If the truth is to be told, Pascal is more of an amateur philosopher than anything else. A superb mathematician, with a mercurial mind, he elaborates a personal philosophy, largely in response to an interior sense of religious and moral crisis. If the polished prose of Descartes' *Meditations* moves logically from episode to episode, Pascal's most famous work *Les Pensées* is an untidy bundle of loosely connected thoughts or sayings. If Descartes presents his discoveries as one continuous, extended, step-by-step prose argument, Pascal, the aphorist, expresses himself in spontaneous, interrupted, flashes of uncanny insight. In Descartes, we have a self-consciously logical manner or presentation. In Pascal's prose, the connecting ligaments are gone, leaving exposed the bare bones of inspiration on which his philosophy stands.

Descartes differs from Pascal in that he sets out to provide a complete logical system of all knowledge. He has confidence in the power of reason; he wants to think his way out of scepticism. Pascal, for reasons of temperament and religious faith, has a more modest view. This Catholic "Calvinist" is all too aware of the foibles and the limits of discursive, human reason. He does not subscribe to the enthusiasms of later Enlightenment thinkers. A religious man, he accepts the necessity of faith. He is not afraid of mysticism. While modern science depends upon logical demonstration, Pascal recognizes truths that cannot be demonstrated. If we are to come by knowledge, we must rely, not just on the mind, but on the heart. We must leave a place, not only for method, but for illumination.

## PASCAL: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PRIMER

Let us begin with an overview of Pascal's epistemology.[11] Because Pascal's comments are scattered, diverse, and brief (even incomplete), there is no definitive, systematic statement of his mature position. But we can piece together a reasonably coherent picture of how he came to think of the possibility of human knowledge.

Pascal clearly distinguishes between logic and intuition as in the following table:

| Faculty or capacity | Logic | Intuition |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **"Organ" or aspect of human nature involved** | The mind | The heart |
| **Specialized activity or product** | Mathematics, arithmetic, geometry, symbolic logic, syllogism, etc. | Judgement: aesthetic, moral, religious, metaphysical, epistemological, etc. |

He associates logic with the mind, intuition with the heart. Mathematics and geometry are expressions of logic; judgement is an expression of intuition. "For judgement is what goes with feeling, as knowledge goes with the mind. Intuition is intrinsic to judgement, as mathematics is to the mind."[12] Here then is a prose summary of his account.

There are two ways we can come to conclusions, beliefs about the world. First, we can use logic. Logic discovers the implications of a certain line of thought. It begins with very clear but obscure principles that are only accessible to the erudite, to those with specialized knowledge. Pascal points out that geometers and mathematicians, "being used to the clear-cut obvious principles of mathematics ... draw no conclusions until they have properly understood and handled their principles."[13] Intuition, on the other hand, operates according to a kind of mental illumination that allows us to glimpse the deep nature of things. It begins with the wide variety of human experience and distils its principles through a kind of "feeling," not an excess of sentimentality, but through a kind of direct, immediate inspiration *without argument*.

If we are going to be good logicians, we must understand that follows from what. We must be able to draw out the implications of what has already been said. This requires a patient, meticulous attention to detail. But Pascal seems to suggest that logic is almost a mechanical activity. Deductive reasoning is, in this sense, trivial; the conclusion is already contained in the premises; it is like unrolling a ball of wool. It takes patience and mental dexterity but its outcome is not to any serious extent original or momentous. Intuitive reasoners are involved in more radical pursuits. They create *new* knowledge; indeed, they come up with those very first principles we need to do logic.

Pascal writes, "We know the truth not only by means of reason but also by means of the heart. It is through the heart that we know the first principles."[14] So the most basic truths of all come to us through the heart, i.e., through inspiration. We do not reason our way to them; we are somehow illuminated; we seize on these most fundamental truths in an instantaneous movement of cognition.

Pascal's theory of intuition is reminiscent of Aristotle's account of induction.[15] In Aristotle, intelligence (*nous*) supplies the first principles through induction (*epagoge*). Although Aristotle does refer to the inductive syllogism (more literally, the syllogism that springs out of induction), he portrays induction as a weaker form of argument (as in contemporary logic). Induction is, for Aristotle, not so much an argument as a matter of insight. It is the process of moving from sense experience to propositional knowledge. We begin with experience and end – through a leap of *nous* – with a universal claim. This happens through a species of intuition or immediate awareness, not through inference properly understood.

Pascal likewise explains intuition as keen discernment; the "intuitive mind," i.e., what Pascal calls the heart, is able to penetrate the distracting complexity of experience, to pull out basic truths from rough-

and-tumble life, to disentangle first principles from evidence that is obvious to everyone. It does not operate logically, in discrete steps moving from proposition to proposition, but through an instantaneous, creative confrontation with lived reality. "The truth must be seen right straightaway, at a glance, and not through a process of reasoning."[16] Intuition is then a kind of bare intelligence. The mind discerns; it perceives the truth through some kind of innate power; it looks at the world intelligently; through some power of understanding, it understands the way things are.

In an important fragment Pascal compares the method of mathematics to the way of intuition. He explains: "*Difference between the mathematical mind and the intuitive mind:* In [mathematics] the principles are obvious, but far removed from common use. ... It would take a totally unsound mind to draw false conclusions ... but with the intuitive mind the principles are in common use in front of everyone's eyes. There is no need to turn our head or strain ourselves; we need only to be clear-sighted. But [our vision] must be clear, for the principles are so intricate and numerous that it is almost impossible not to miss some. But the omission of one principle can lead to error."[17]

The way of intuition is holistic: intuitive truth does not depend on linear thinking. Pascal writes, "These things are so delicate, and so numerous, that we need a really clear, delicate faculty in order to feel them, and to judge correctly and fairly according to this impression, without being able, most of the time, to demonstrate it in sequence as in geometry."[18] Intuition is not like following a clearly-marked path: it is more like finding our position on a map. Encircled by overlapping fields of stimuli, hemmed in on all sides by human experience, we react by formulating a decisive understanding. We hit upon a reason, a principle, an insight. We utter a truth. We do not reason from premises to a conclusion. Employing a species of judgement that comes to us through the heart, we reason from experience to insight. We arrive at general truths, not by studying the implications of claims that have been already expressed in language, but through direct *observation* of the world.

In Pascal's own writing aphorisms replace arguments. These aphorisms are naked inspiration; they are product without process, or rather, intuition without argument. The train of thought is not continuous but interrupted. There are flashes of brilliance, sudden thoughts that lay bare, in a twist of irony or a memorable phrase, some deep truth about the human condition. The movement is immediate: a leap from witnessed phenomena to a ringing truth that exposes or captures an underlying aspect of reality. This is intuition; this is reasoning from the heart. The movement of understanding is from attentive observation to penetrating analysis, from particular experience to general principle. But the stroke of understanding is utterly simple, and it all happens in a non-discursive instant, without argument. Pascal's method is, properly understood, inductive (or intuitive) rather than deductive. It does not rely on arguments but on bare discernment.

Descartes' philosophical heirs are often more extreme than Descartes himself. More recent proponents of the epistemological method have brandished the Cartesian method as *the* way of doing philosophy. Brian Leiter, the "moderate" commentator quoted above, goes so far as to observe: "Whatever the limitations of analytic philosophy, it is clearly far preferable to what has befallen humanistic fields like English, which have largely collapsed as serious disciplines while becoming the repository for all the world's bad philosophy, bad social science, and bad history. ... English professor 'celebrities' like Stanley Fish and Andrew Ross are fine contemporary examples of 'the man of letters who really is nothing but represents almost everything, playing and substituting for the expert, and taking it upon himself in all modesty to get himself paid, honoured, and celebrated.' [Leiter's quote is from Nietzsche.] When compared to the sophomoric nonsense that passes for "philosophizing" in the broader academic culture – often in fields like English, Law, Political Science, and sometimes History – one can only have the highest respect for the intellectual rigor and specialization of analytic philosophers."[19]

One may feel legitimate dismay at some of what has happened to the study of English literature (and related disciplines), but this kind of blanket condemnation of almost anything that is not analytic philosophy is clearly partisan. The epistemological school has narrowed-down the philosophical enterprise. Leiter and colleagues equate logic with rigor; they see the humanities as soft, muddled, lazy, lacking in substance; they associate knowledge with exact science. Expressed in a Pascalian idiom, they want to turn philosophy into mathematics. But philosophy is not mathematics, at least not in any exclusive sense, for as Pascal is at pains to explain, there is more to knowledge than the rigors of logic. Any adequate epistemology needs to account for more than logical method.

## KNOWLEDGE FROM THE HEART: WHEN *FEELING* IS MORE THAN FEELING

To cite the most celebrated (and perhaps least understood) passage in *Les Pensées*: "the heart has its reasons that reason does not know – we know this in countless ways."[20] While the point has been influential and is often cited approvingly, it is not fully grasped. Pascal's association of intuitive knowledge with the "heart" has led to a misunderstanding. Pascal does not identify intuition with mere emotion, with bare sentiment.

In describing the principles discovered by intuition, Pascal writes, "*On les voit à peine, on les sent plutôt qu'on les voit; on a des peines infinies à faire sentir à ceux qui ne les sentent pas d'eux-mêmes.*"[21] Honor Levi's English translation runs: "Such principles can hardly be seen, they are felt rather than seen; enormous care has to be taken to make them felt by people who cannot feel them themselves."[22] Levi consistently translates the French noun "*sentiment*" with the English word "feeling" and the French verb "*sentir*" as the English "to feel." This is standard procedure and not

incorrect, but it leads to a misunderstanding. It is often assumed that Pascal is decrying cold hard logic and reasserting the importance of warm emotional feeling. But Pascal does not think of intuition as an emotion. In fact, Pascal is comparing intuition to sense-perception. Intuition is like sense perception in that it apprizes its object directly. We hear a musical note as being in tune or out of tune. We do not have to calculate to tell if the note is sharp or flat. We simply listen and there it is. It presents itself immediately to our sense of hearing. In the same way, intuition places truths directly in front of us. It gives us immediate access to knowledge. It shows us the truth without calculation, i.e., without the intermediary of logic.

Pascal's choice of words is in line with the general usage of his time. The first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'académie française* (1694) lists the primary meanings of the French noun "*sentiment*" as the "impression that objects make on the senses;" "the function of the senses;" and, "referring to dogs, ... the sense of smell." It defines the verb "*sentir*" as the activity of "receiv[ing] an impression in the senses."[23] The editors note that the verb "is hardly ever used except for the sense of smell, touch, and taste." And again, "It is more specifically said about the sense of smell." We might then translate the previous passage: "Such principles are hardly seen: we *smell*, *touch*, or *taste* them instead of seeing them: and we must go to infinite pains to make those who cannot do so on their own *smell*, *touch* or *taste* them."

If "seeing" is the traditional metaphor for mental acts of intuition, Pascal avoids this terminology. Intuition operates in the dark. When it is too dark to see properly, we can still "smell, touch or taste" the world around us. That is, when rigorous, unmistakable logic fails, we can somehow discern the shape of things intuitively. When Pascal writes that the heart "feels" the truth, he means then that intuition operates like sense perception; it allows us to reach out and grasp the world immediately. It provides an immediate, naked contact with reality that comes through the operation of sheer intelligence. It is like reaching out and touching a wall in the dark. This is how we access the most basic levels of knowledge.

The editors of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* note that the noun "*sentiment*" can also used to refer to "affections, passions, and all the movements of the heart," and they list as a *metaphorical* sense of "*sentir*," "hav[ing] the heart *touched*; the soul moved by something." On Pascal's account, intuition includes, in particular, knowledge of the principles of religion and morality. These principles have an affective pull on us; they do not inform us that something is the case in a detached manner; they pull us towards a certain kind of understanding. Intuition is not without feeling; at the same time, intuition is not *mere* emotion. It has epistemological authority. It is as certain as logic. Pascal asserts "[Our] knowledge of first principles such as space, time, movement, numbers, is as certain as any that our reasoning can give us, and it is on this knowledge by means of the heart and instinct that reason must rely and must base all its argument**s**. The heart feels that there are three dimensions in space and that

there is an infinite series of numbers, and then reason goes on to prove that there are no two numbers of which one is the double of the other. The principles are felt, and the propositions are proved, both conclusively, although in different ways."[24]

## CARTESIAN INTUITION: A NATURAL LIGHT

Contemporary epistemological accounts of intuition are hopelessly corrupted. At least in philosophy, the concept is given very little weight. There are two aspects to the present understanding. On the one hand, intuition is subjective; it is a vague interior experience, a hunch, a feeling (in the non-rational sense of the word). On the other hand, it has no epistemological authority. It provides an unreliable guide as to what really is. This account has its source in the kind of Cartesian logicism Pascal attacks. Because intuition is not logical, it is irrational. The best is can do is provide the starting points for the serious work of logic.

If Pascal develops a theory of knowledge from the heart, Descartes has his own view of intuition. Cartesian intuition is a matter of introspection. It is, as with Augustine, an internal mechanism – it comes from *inside* the individual mind and is thus more Platonic than Aristotelian in character. Intuition is first and foremost an inward seeing, which is in line with the way the modern account emphasizes subjectivity, although Descartes, unlike some of his contemporary followers, did not himself doubt the epistemological role of intuition as a source of certain truth.

Descartes writes, "By *intuition* I mean, not the unstable witness of the senses, nor the misleading judgement of the imagination ... but a [mental] representation which is the work of the pure and attentive intelligence, a representation so easy and so distinct that no doubt persists as to what we understand; or again, which comes to the same, a representation inaccessible to doubt made by the pure and attentive intelligence, which is born only of the light of reason, and which, because it is simpler, is still more certain than deduction."[25]

Descartes views intuition as an infallible mental faculty that provides us with clear and distinct ideas about the most basic truths. His account is really very traditional. He uses the term "the natural light of reason" to refer to this initial capacity of intelligent insight. The natural light of reason apprehends the simplest truths, the truths that all knowledge depends upon. Descartes observes, "whatever is shown me by the light of nature ... cannot in any way be doubtful."[26] And again, "there can be no other faculty that [we] can trust as much as this light."[27] If, however, intuition is the anchor for deduction, the Cartesian method overwhelmingly emphasizes the exercise of the deductive demonstration that ensues. It privileges logic as the science of drawing out, step-by-step, necessary implications.

The Cartesian method begins in very little intuition but ends with extensive deduction. (Ideally, Descartes' method begins with a very few

core beliefs. In his *Meditation*s, the *cogito* may be the only intuited axiom.) Mostly, Descartes champions deduction, the method of rigorous serial inference that allows us to extend our knowledge indefinitely. This method of logical entailment is presented as the new, scientific way of doing philosophy: Descartes thinks that this is what will save the world from scepticism.

Descartes believes that we can use deduction to elaborate a complete system of knowledge. In his *Regulae*, he proposes a definition: "By *deduction*, we mean everything that is necessarily concluded from other things known with certainty. ... Even if by themselves these things are not self-evident, it is sufficient that they are deduced from true principles that are already known, by a continuous uninterrupted movement of thought."[28] Descartes compares deductive inference to the way in which we observe the physical connection between individual links in a long chain. "We know that the last ring of some long chain is attached to the first, even if we cannot survey in a single glance the whole string of intermediate rings upon which this connection depends; it is sufficient if we have examined the individual rings one after another, and we remember that from the first to last, each one is attached to its immediate neighbours."[29] In a similar way, deduction leads us to certain truths even if we cannot retain within the mind, at any single moment, all the individual inferences we had to make in order to arrive at the conclusion.

Descartes distinguishes between the cognitive operations of intuition and deduction in a manner reminiscent of mediaeval theories. Intuition happens all at once, in a single instant, whereas deduction involves logical movement, step-by-step progress, from one proposition to another. Descartes writes, "We can so distinguish intellectual intuition from necessary deduction, in that we conceive one, but not the other, as a sort of movement or succession; and because, in addition, for deduction, ... it is the memory that, in a certain manner, endows it with certitude."[30] We need memory for deduction because we have to remember that we have completed previous steps that we are no longer in the process of performing. Intuition is understanding all-at-once; it happens in an instant, so it does not require the same exercise of the faculty of memory. (Recall Pascal's aphoristic writing. The insight is not proved through a step-by-step logical process. It simply appears on the page, all at once, without any preparation. We do not have to remember what went before to be assured of what went after. All we have is what went after. This sudden conceptualization is, for Descartes, the basic feature of intuition as opposed to deduction.)

Descartes believes that we can come to know the same truths, "according to the point of view from which we place ourselves, sometimes from intuition, sometimes by deduction."[31] "First principles are only known by intuition, while distant conclusions can only be known by deduction."[32] But exactly where we stop and end is not so important. The point is we have to start somewhere and we have to end somewhere. We grasp the first truths by intuition, and we grasp the final truths through deduction. What matters

most is the Cartesian method of stepping logically from stone to stone until we cross over the widest rivers to a bold new land of irrefutable knowledge.[33]

## IS CARTESIAN "ACCELERATED DEDUCTION" INTUITION?

As we have seen, Descartes does develop a theory of intuition. But the difference between Pascal and Descartes is where they place their emphasis. The reason Pascal attacks the Cartesian method as "useless and uncertain" is because of its overwhelming focus on deductive chains of reasoning. He elaborates his theory of heartfelt knowledge in direct reaction to what he sees as a kind of creeping scientism. A mathematician and a scientist himself, he wants, nonetheless, to reassert and secure the place of bare intelligence in epistemology. Hence his emphasis on knowledge from the heart, on intuition.

Contemporary scholars overlook subtle differences in this historical debate. Ian Hacking, who wants to consolidate Leibniz's reputation as the progenitor of modern analytic philosophy, goes so far as to suggest that Descartes' method of deduction is a matter of intuition rather than logic. Hacking argues that Descartes believed that we should practice logical inference with an eye to increasing our capacity for rapid deduction. We should learn to move through the steps in an argument faster and faster until, in the ideal case, the staggered movement from proposition to proposition becomes akin to the direct immediate apprehension of final truth in a single bound. As Hacking explains, "the thing to do with proofs is not to check the formal steps slowly and piecemeal, but to run over the proof faster and faster until the whole thing is one's head at once, and clear perception is guaranteed."[34] At this point, logic has become intuition. The serial step-by-step movement of inference becomes (in effect) a direct, unmediated awareness of the truth.

Hacking's account is the received view in the literature. On this interpretation, Descartes does not envision any ultimate distinction between intuition and deduction. Intuition is deduction to the nth degree; it is the ideal towards which deduction should strive. John Cottingham describes the Cartesian account likewise. He comments, "In the *Regulae* (*Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence*) ... intuition is put forward as the fundamental basis of all reliable knowledge; although a finite mind will often be unable to 'see' a whole series of interconnected truths at a single glance, the ideal remains that it should attempt to survey the series 'in a single and uninterrupted sweep of thought', so that the process of deduction is reduced, as far as possible, to direct intuition."[35] Again, Stephen Gaukroger comments that "In the limiting case ... we run through [Cartesian] deduction so quickly that we have no longer to rely on memory, with the result that we 'have the whole intuition' before us at a single time. So, in the limiting case, knowledge consists not in intuition and deduction as such, but simply in intuition."[36] Finally, Jacques Brunschwig observes

that in Descartes' method, "the acceleration of the [logical] movement of thought [is such] that deduction ... is, in turn, for all intents and purposes, reduced to intuition."[37]

There is a grain of truth to this historical interpretation. Descartes does, as these commentators suggest, recommend that we develop our logical powers and our capacity for mental acuity through practice. But the deduction-as-a-slower-form-of-intuition account goes too far. We must situate Descartes' comments in their original context. When Descartes mentions the possibility of what I will call "accelerated deduction" in the *Regulae*, he is considering the predicament of the inferior reasoner, someone who cannot remember the steps in a mathematical proof. He advises: "In order to remedy this I would run over [these steps] many times, by a continuous movement of the imagination, in such a way that [the mind] has an intuition of each term at the same time that it passes on to the others, and this I would do until I learned to pass from the first relation to the last so quickly that there was almost no role left for memory and I seemed to have the whole before me at the same time."[38]

This is perhaps helpful advice. But does it show that Cartesian deduction is the same as intuition? We must ask: what is this advice for? It is intended as an aid for inferior reasoners, as kind of logical physiotherapy. Descartes proposes the technique of accelerated deduction, not as a method of discovery, but as rehabilitation. This is logical training – it is getting in shape for the memory work of real logic. It might be compared to playing scales on a piano. One practices scales in order to be able to play real music. One does not practice scales in order to practice more scales. Likewise with the technique of accelerated deduction. The point of accelerated deduction is not more accelerated deduction. It is only a warm-up for the real work of logic.

The Cartesian method of accelerated deduction is, thus, a form of mental exercise in the same way that piano scales are musical exercises. It is like an athlete running up the same set of stairs again and again to get in shape. Descartes points out that the reasoner can, "in this way, while aiding the memory, also heal a certain mental slowness, and increase by a certain measure his mental capacity."[39] The goal of Cartesian method is *not* the elimination of logic. Descartes does not want to replace logic with intuition; he wants us to perfect our capacity for logical inference through repeated, routine exercise.

Modern commentators take Descartes' advice out of context. Gaukroger interprets the Cartesian position as follows: "[Cartesian inference] is a paradigmatically mental operation by which one grasps connections between one's ideas. Understanding an inference consists, not in spelling out and analyzing its steps, but in trying to bypass these steps altogether so that one can grasp the connection they exhibit in its own right, free from the mediation of logical steps as it were."[40] This is to misconstrue the basic thrust of Descartes philosophy. Descartes does not believe that we should bypass logic, but that we should painstakingly unpack the mysteries

of the world, step-by-step, through logic. The goal is not replacing deduction with intuition. It is understanding what follows from what. Intuition gets us started, but this is only the initial phase of investigation. It is where the journey begins, not where it ends. This is not the final aim of logical inquiry.[41]

This then is the difference between Pascal and Descartes. Descartes is a deductivist; he (mostly) champions logical entailment; rigorous, serial inference is what saves us. Pascal, in contrast, gives a much larger role to intuition; he is, in this sense, an "inspirationalist"; illumination, instantaneous bare intelligence is what saves us. In Descartes, one practices deduction until one can sprint to the conclusion; in Pascalian intuition, the underlying thought materializes without logic. Running very fast – furious stride by furious stride – is not the same as reaching out and touching the truth like a wall in the dark. In Cartesian logic, inference pulls us step-by-step up the ladder of knowledge; in Pascalian intuition, the ladder has no rungs and we instantaneously discover that we are already at the top. In Descartes, we (mostly) discover truth by moving through a chain of reasons; Pascal dwells at length on the point that we also encounter the truth directly, in the absence of argument. Descartes, so to speak, believes in running very fast; we must logically pursue knowledge. On a much wider scope of questions, Pascal discovers the truth already inside his heart. Thus, Pascal's fragmentary, aphoristic philosophy is a radical departure from the Cartesian rationalism favoured by the "epistemological school" that has taken control of analytic philosophy. Pascal's method, we could say, represents a fresh way of doing philosophy.

## BEYOND THE CARTESIAN METHOD: PASCAL AND RELIGION

If Descartes emphasizes the importance of method, he identifies method with the deductive logic of necessary, serial inference. In *La Recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle*, Eudoxe promises to teach Poliandre (Greek for "many, i.e., every man") the method of certain knowledge. He comments: "I believe I will have fulfilled my promise rather well, if in explaining truths which can be *deduced* from ordinary things known by everyone, I make you able to find by yourself all the others, whenever it pleases you to take the trouble to search them out."[42] This then is the key to complete knowledge: deduction understood as a step-by-step process of rigorous, serial inference. Descartes uses intuition to get the process of serial inference under way, but it is the deductive method of sequential inference that leads to knowledge.

Strictly speaking, there is no systematic method in Pascal's *Les Pensées*. There is no algorithm, no protocol, no set of procedures or rules – in short, no Cartesian method of deductive entailment – that leads to certain knowledge. All we need is intelligence. The aphorisms in *Les Pensées* are a product of pure, unaided intuition. Pascal's doctrine of heartfelt knowledge and his method of literary composition both emphasize the importance of

direct mental illumination: what different philosophers have called intuition, insight, inspiration, *nous*, *intellectus*, or understanding.[43] When Pascal acknowledges the importance of this non-discursive way of knowing, he is (without knowing it) inserting himself within the very heart of the Western tradition.

If Descartes has won out in philosophy, the subsequent failure of any exclusive reliance on his deductive method has lead to a denial of metaphysics and even to a radical scepticism. (It seems ironic that the kind of excesses Leiter complains about can be traced, at least in part, to the exaggerations of the epistemological school of which he is a champion.) Pascal never believed in the Enlightenment project in the first place. In response to Descartes' "Reformation" in epistemology, Pascal launches a Counter-Reformation. Pascal is a man of religious faith. His mystical experience of a personal God, during the so-called "night of fire," cemented his religious vocation. Gary Saul Morson writes, "Pascal's thoughts are traditionally the product of his 'night of fire' in which he was seized by a truth beyond himself."[44] Although we cannot link all of Pascal's aphoristic production to a single event, however dramatic or decisive, it is true that Pascal's religious convictions and his positive view of the role of faith push him towards the aphoristic turn of expression.

Descartes, the optimist, wants to use inference to prove, among other things, the existence of God. Pascal, the pessimist, believes in faith. Religious faith means, for Pascal, believing without proof, i.e., believing in the absence of deductive logical demonstration. Descartes aims to defeat scepticism using science and logic. Pascal more astutely traces the modern philosophical malady of scepticism to a one-sided reliance on reason understood solely as a capacity for logical inference or abstract mathematical argument. The problem for Pascal is not that we cannot have certain knowledge; the problem is that modern philosophy denigrates intuition. It overlooks the epistemological possibilities of bare intelligence. It focuses exclusively on logic. Pascal exclaims: "As if argument alone were able to instruct us[!]"[45]

Pascal's philosophy is elaborated in response to the kinds of attitudes espoused by the modern epistemological school. It aims at intelligibility, at making sense of the world, not at proof. His famous wager should be understood in a similar light. The point is not to prove God's existence like a mathematical theorem using deductive reason. The point is that belief in God makes sense of the world. Indeed, it makes so much sense, it would be irrational not to act on this belief. Proof, justification, deduction, demonstration have their place in any sound world-view. But they are not enough, on their own, to account for the full extent of human knowledge.

Intuition, the bare exercise of mental discernment, is only one aspect of intelligence, but it is a particularly important phenomenon. This is where we draw closest to the unaided activity of intelligence. We are distracted by the rigours of calculation, logic, empirical science; we come to

see them as something that is larger than human, as something that possesses an independent epistemological authority, over and beyond human intelligence. But these are only more particular expressions of a basic capacity for understanding that renders the world intelligible. That capacity that, for Pascal, begins in the heart.

**NOTES**

[1] Brian Leiter, 2006-2008 Philosophical Gourmet Report, http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com.

[2] Leiter, 2006-2008 Gourmet Report.

[3] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 52.

[4] Pascal, *Pensées*, a445. The number of the passage in *Les Pensées* refers to the number in the authoritative edition by Sellier. I cite from two editions, Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, translated by Honor Levi, edited with introduction and notes by Anthony Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), hereafter referred to as "a," and the authoritative French edition: *Pensées*, texte établi, annoté et présenté par Philippe Sellier (Paris: Classiques Garnier Multimédia, 1999), hereafter referred to as "b." All citations from French have been translated by the author.

[5] Pascal, *Pensées*, a142.

[6] Pascal, *Pensées*, a142.

[7] Pascal, *Pensées*, a142.

[8] Cf. Ian Hacking, *Why does language matter to philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); "Leibniz and Descartes: Proof and Eternal Truths," in *Rationalism, Empiricism and Idealism*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986): 47-60.

[9] René Descartes, *La recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle*. in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, Tome II (1638-1642) (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1999): 496-497, 1106-1107; hereafter 1999a. All the Descartes translations (from the French editions) are by the author.

[10] Descartes, 1999a, 1140.

[11] For a more complete account see Louis Groarke, "Philosophy as Inspiration: Blaise Pascal and the Epistemology of Aphorisms," *Poetics Today* (2007) 28: 393-441.

[12] Pascal, *Pensées*, a671.

[13] Pascal, *Pensées*, b670.

[14] Pascal, *Pensées*, a142.

[15] Cf. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics,* II, xix, *Prior Analytics*, II.xxiii-xxiv. For up-to-date commentary see: Paolo Biondi, *Aristotle: Posterior Analytics II.19*, (Sainte-Foy QC: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004); Louis Groarke, *An Aristotelian Account of Induction: Creating Something from Nothing* (Kingston, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009).

[16] Pascal, *Pensées*, a670.

[17] Pascal, *Pensées*, a670.

[18] Pascal, *Pensées*, b670. I have translated Pascal's expression "*par ordre*" as "in sequence." The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (1694) defines "*ordre*" as "*Arrangement, disposition des choses mises en leur rang.*"

[19] Leiter, 2006-2008 Gourmet Report.

[20] Pascal, *Pensées*, b680. "*Le coeur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît point: on le sait en mille choses.*" To translate the passage more literally: "The heart has its reasons that reason is not familiar with: we know this through a thousand things."

[21] Pascal, *Pensées*, b670.

[22] Pascal, *Pensées*, a670.

[23] L'Académie Française, *Le Dictionnaire de l'académie française* (Paris: Chez la Veuve de Jean Baptiste Coignard, Imprimeur ordinaire du Roy, & de l'Académie Françoise, 1694), 1ère Edition), http://dictionnaires.atilf.fr/dictionnaires/ACADEMIE/PREMIERE/premiere.fr.html

[24] Pascal, *Pensées*, a142.

[25] René Descartes, *Régles pour la direction de l'esprit*, translated and annotated by Jacques Brunschwig, in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, Tome III, 1999: 368, p. 87; hereafter, 1999b.

[26] Cf. "As far as my natural impulses are concerned, in the past I have often judged myself to have been driven by them to make a poorer choice when it was a question of choosing a good; and I fail to see why I should place any greater faith in them than in other matters." René Descartes, *Meditations*, translated by Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), III, 38-39, p. 72.

[27] Descartes, *Meditations* (Cress) III, 38-39, p. 72.

[28] Descartes, 1999b: 369-370, pp. 88-9.

[29] Descartes, 1999b: 369-370, pp. 88-9.

[30] Descartes, 1999b: 370, p. 89.

[31] Descartes, 1999b: 370, pp. 89-90.

[32] Descartes, 1999b: 370, pp. 89-90.

[33] Hacking makes a similar point, 1986: 51-52.

[34] Hacking, 1975, 162.

[35] John Cottingham, *A Descartes Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993): s.v. "Intuition."

[36] Stephen Gaukroger, *Cartesian Logic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 50.

[37] My translation of Jacques Brunschwig in Descartes, 1999b, III, p. 89, note 1.

[38] Cited in Stephen Gaukroger, 27 (*Régle VII*).

[39] Descartes, 1999b: VII.388, p. 111.

[40] Gaukroger, 1989, 128.

[41] Gaukroger's concerns about the non-ampliative nature of deduction are really an off-shoot of a more contemporary account of deduction that identifies (wrongly, I would argue) deductiveness with formal validity.

[42] Descartes, 1999a: 503, p. 1112, my italics.

[43] Cf. Louis Groarke, "Philosophy as Inspiration: Blaise Pascal and the Epistemology of Aphorisms."

[44] Gary Saul Morson, "The Aphorism: Fragments from the Breakdown of Reason," *New Literary History* 34: 422.

[45] Pascal, *Pensées*, a142.

# MODERNITY AND INTELLIGIBILITY:
# A COMPARISON OF THE INTERPRETATIONS
# OF RENÉ GUÉNON AND JACQUES MARITAIN

*DAVID LEA*

## INTRODUCTION

Descartes' philosophy represents a profound break with the Medieval philosophical tradition and the especially the Scholastic tradition. He is credited with ushering in the period referred to as Modernity. However, the question that this paper asks is whether Modernity and the period many now call Post Modernity, actually represent an advance in intelligibility and rational understanding in comparison with these earlier traditions. Some argue in fact that Modernity, and so-called Post Modernity, together with the scientific world view mark a decline in overall intelligibility. I compare the views of René Guénon and Jacques Maritain on the subject of Modern philosophy with emphasis on the issue of intelligibility and its meaning in the contemporary context.

This paper considers the subject of intelligibility and its sources. The issue of intelligibility will be discussed with reference to both its application in the natural sciences and within human affairs. I concentrate on René Guénon's work on this subject. As a means of comparison I also make reference to the dominant ideology of Modernity and the views of the so called post modernists. I also further compare Guénon's views with those of Jacques Maritain who assumed a similar approach to Modernity and its intellectual inheritance. However I underline important points of divergence particularly with regard to the issue of intelligibility as applied in socio-political affairs.

I will initially begin with a comparison of Guénon's views on Modernity with those of Jacques Maritain and we will see that on many points there exists substantial agreement. I should point out that Guénon like Maritain was a twentieth century French intellectual, and a religious convert who decided to live outside his native country. In Guénon's case the conversion was to Islam from Catholicism. However, it should be underlined that Guénon was a self proclaimed 'traditionalist', believing that the world's ancient and most important religions are all gateways to the one ultimate truth. Therefore one religion may validly be preferred on cultural and personal grounds, rather than from claims to the ultimate truth.

It is worth discussing Guénon's views on conversion, before we proceed. He speaks of conversion as the gathering and concentration of powers and a certain return by which the being passes from human thought

to divine comprehension.[1] But he explains that in conversion nothing implies the attribution of the superiority of one traditional form over another. The attribution of superiority would deny the essential unity of all traditions. He claims that it is an issue of what might be called spiritual expediency but not individual preference. He explains that it may well happen someone is born into a milieu not in harmony with his own nature and because not really suitable for him does not allow his intellectual and spiritual possibilities to develop in a normal manner.[2]

## MODERNITY

René Descartes is usually regarded as having ushered in the period we refer to as Modernity. What preceded so-called Modernity is often said to be a period in which religious beliefs embodied in the Western cultural tradition dominated European intellectual thought. Descartes, it is held, represents a profound break with this tradition. Descartes' philosophy is regarded as a bold attempt to establish absolute and universal truths relying on reason alone. His reflections and meditations on 'certainty' convey a rejection of the dominant scholasticism in which rational inquiry played merely a supplementary role under the tutelage of a hegemonic Christian theology. According to Descartes, the intellect finds within itself all the innate ideas it needs to achieve knowledge and thus receives everything from God and not from the thing it knows. This, as Maritain has explained, leads us to delight in our acquired knowledge and dominion over the real.[3] Moreover, he says Descartes' thought appears as a "sort of demigod fabricating the cognoscible world with its concepts." The philosophers who followed Descartes in the Enlightenment and beyond shared a similar project in which unaided reason sought to ground a given systematic representation, whether it be God, self, the Absolute, dialectical materialism, the "élan vital", or even logical atomism to name just few of the candidates.[4] This period of thought is said to be marked by a continuing search to endow our philosophic, scientific systems and even social systems with meaning through reason alone.

'Post Modernity', a term which has frequent currency with today's intellectuals, can be interpreted as the belief in the futility of these efforts, and moreover an acceptance of the belief that the multifaceted human activities including human methodologies, institutions, sciences, disciplines, intellectual systems and social ordering cannot derive a meaning from something external to itself. Meaning must be found within the system to be identified with an internal consistency, coherence and functionality. Moreover, Post Modernity also rejects the Eurocentric belief that European values, especially those generated during the Enlightenment that relate to the social order have universal application. One also detects an associated strain within Post Modernism, which could be interpreted as a post colonial rejection of the European adventure in which colonialism was viewed as the

vehicle to improve mankind by spreading European civilization and values throughout the world.

The above represents an adumbration of Modernity's intellectual framework from a currently influential post modern perspective. According to this view we have now moved beyond the intellectual shadow of Descartes and ultimately rejected that influence. However there is another interpretation of the Cartesian influence that indeed does not accept that we have gone beyond the central ideology that he represents.

Modernity, as we have said, conveys a strong belief in the unaided capacity of reason to go outside tradition and establish its own truth. Closely associated are the ideas of the autonomy of the rational individual who is in a sense independent of the natural environment and obviously in a significant sense has the capacity to be independent of traditional categories of thought and the socializing process. However, Descartes' approach in all fairness was not that radically novel. The Andalusian tradition in Islamic thought, which heavily influenced European thinkers, had for some time promoted the capacity of reason to go outside tradition and to discover its own truth which is not the product of received dogma, teachings, religious instruction, cultural inheritance or the immediate information from the senses. Ibn Tufayl in *Hay Ibn Yaqzen* presented the story of a boy growing up in isolation on deserted island. The work sought to suggest a plausible set of conclusions about a possible human existence achieved through an exercise of reason that does not rely on assumptions drawn from any particular tradition of thought or belief. The notion that these ideas or truths could be established through a process of thought independent of such influences suggested to Ibn Tufayl's friend Ibn Rushd (Averroes) that philosophy can be defended as an enterprise that is conducted independently of religion and yet one which establishes the same universal truths. This insight provided Ibn Rushd with a possible answer to Al Ghazali's claim that philosophy and religion are incompatible and the former must bow to the latter. The so called double truth theory of knowledge can thus be seen as a restatement of Ibn Tufayl's message that reason can stand on its own unaided by religion.

However, it would be dangerous to give the impression that we are here merely offering a facile reduction in which it might be said that Descartes was merely repackaging or expressing the same ideas that had already been current in the philosophies of Al Andalus. Of course, Descartes' use of radical skepticism has been compared to similar methods employed by Islamic philosophers to avoid unexamined reliance on received truths or dogma. Certainly the parallel in method and methodology is striking. Evidence of the Islamic and Andalusian influence on European thought is seen in the recurring use of the counterfactual hypothesis that suspends the intellect's reliance on the beliefs that support personal identity in order to establish universal truth untouched by the contingencies of socialization, education or tradition. Descartes' intellectual struggles offer an obvious example. Like Ibn Sina, before him and Ibn Tufayl, he uses a

counterfactual hypothesis to establish what he regards as a set of universal truths accessible to all humanity through the agency of reason alone, which he calls innate ideas.[5] This philosophical method involves the projection of an imagined context in which the usual influences would not apply, in which our normal identities would not appear. In the Islamic tradition Ibn Sina's example of the flying man is one such representative attempt; Ibn Tufayl's story of the boy growing up in isolation on an island unconnected to the usual sources of civilization is a further example.

Nevertheless, at the same time, it has to be said that Islamic philosophers in their conclusions maintained the identification of Being and thought as conceived by the Classical Greek philosophers. In contrast, Descartes in his conclusions re-formulated the traditional ontologies inherited from the Greek philosophers by distinguishing thought from Being, when the latter is realized in physical substrate. This move entailed the ontological distinctness of human beings as thinking beings (*res cogitans*), profoundly severing the physical (*res extensa*) and the intellectual (*res cogitans*) into separable ontologies. This promoted the vision of a unique humanity, disparate and distinct from the natural order, which one could hypothesize, eventually led to a concept of humanity as intellectually capable of understanding and controlling nature. Humanity's independence from the natural order of physical existence through a unique faculty of reason promoted modernity's belief in the human capacity to shape and control both the physical and social environment. One needs to make note of these important elements that were not to be found in the principal Islamic thinkers who in their conclusions remained firmly within the ontological categories established by Plato and Aristotle.

It is also worthwhile recalling classical ontology to appreciate the significance of Descartes' departure from this tradition and the European scholastic tradition, which retained the central elements of Greek classicism. Within the classical Greek tradition the intellectual element pervades the material substrate in order that it possess meaning and substance. Matter isolated from the intellectual principle or the forms is unintelligible and therefore has no meaning. It constitutes *materia prima* or pure potentiality that cannot be anything particular until form is impressed upon it. But by characterizing matter as extension and denying any association with the intellectual Descartes separates matter from the intellectual forms. Thus the material world stands in danger of losing its intelligibility because Classical philosophy maintained that the intelligible form is necessary to give meaning to animate inert matter. Neither the Christian Scholastic nor the Islamic Medieval philosophers would have accepted such a move. Henceforth, Cartesian matter is cut off from intellectual principles and *a fortiori* thought which knows reality through these principles.

On matters related to the issue of intelligibility, Jacques Maritain invokes the Thomistic tradition and argues that Descartes' emphasis on innate ideas and his definition of matter as essentially extension has severed the human soul not only from the material world and the human body itself

but also from the spiritual reality which is the ultimate source of our knowledge. According to Maritain, for Descartes "In short, we know only our ideas; thought has direct contact only with itself."[6] As Maritain explains, ideas are now cut off from the material world and as he says it is easy to envision the break up of the system as people such as Locke and Hume follow the same course (identify knowledge with knowledge of ideas) and questions arise as to the correspondence between ideas and reality. The human being is thus isolated within itself only cognoscent of its own thought. This is a form of autonomy but it is also isolation. Thus while isolated from its own body, the human being is also separated from the ultimate spiritual reality which it must approach to give meaning and substance to its ideas. As Maritain explains, for the scholastics there is communication first by means of the sense with things outside ourselves and then by means of the intellect and ideas actively drawn from the senses to the essential nature of reality. The Cartesian, however, relies solely on its own ideas which are not dependent on a known reality outside itself.[7]

For Maritain, this epistemic orientation entails attitudes towards nature and the human project that lacks a spiritual communion. Cartesian understanding cut off from its spiritual source, does not drag itself along towards things Divine, it settles comfortably in worldly things.[8] He tells us that the end of the effort to know is now practical and the human being has become obsessed with the desire to dominate and utilize material nature. The eventual outcome he states is that the practical domination of created force became two centuries later "the final aim of civilization and that is a very great evil".[9] As he says further, all this implies an anthropocentric naturalism of wisdom. It is the doctrine of the necessary progress of salvation by science and reason alone. This is a temporal and worldly salvation.

It is interesting to note that Guénon reaches similar conclusions in his study of Cartesianism although the conclusions are reached from a slightly different emphasis. Maritain tends to underline the isolation of the human being who knows only his own thought and, thus severed from nature and the external sources of spiritual wisdom, ineluctably strives to dominate natural reality. Guénon on the other hand sees Cartesian dualism has inherently unstable. The separation between material reality and the spiritual reality of thought cannot hold and with its collapse the lower material reality overwhelms the spiritual reality of thought. Guénon's thinking parallels that of Maritain as he explains that rationalism associated with Cartesianism involves the denial of every principle superior to reason. It has thus been denied communication with what he calls the pure and transcendent intellect and no longer reflects its light. Lacking direction from these higher principles it tends more and more towards the lowest level towards the inferior pole of existence plunging ever more deeply into materiality. It submits readily because this submission conforms to its desires. And this descent conforms to what Guénon calls the 'reign of quantity'.

Unlike the so called post modernists who believe we have gone beyond the Cartesian perspective, René Guénon understands Descartes as the initiator of an intellectual cycle, that has yet to be played out and which has seen the ascendancy of the materialist approach and the profane sciences over metaphysics and the transcendent intellectual principles. Whereas the latter should be understood as the meaningful basis of the material existence, Descartes' philosophy regards the material world as an independent and autonomous sphere of reality. As Guénon states, "…Descartes , whose place is at the starting point of many specifically modern philosophical and scientific conceptions, tried to define matter in terms of extension, and to make his definition the principle of quantitative physics…" [10] The intellectual cycle, which finds its starting point with Descartes, and of which we are a part, has witnessed the denigration of metaphysics and the elevation of profane sciences that seek to reduce human existence and reality itself to material states. For Guénon this is absurd because matter has no universal denotation, but is known according to different forms with numerously different characteristics and qualities. Matter, which could be distinguished from any particular distinct character or form would be *materia prima* or pure potentiality, and therefore unknowable. In order to reduce all reality in its variegated aspects to universal 'matter', it is necessary to conceive of matter as a phenomenon that lacks any a particular character or quality. Indeed in order to accomplish this it is necessary to disassociate matter from any known quality and only utilize quantitative descriptions. Quantitative physics attempts to do just that. As a result, modern scientism, which seeks to endow matter with universal properties, leaves us with only one universal, its quantifiable character. Although everything quantitative must be expressed in terms of number – in fact quantity can never escape quality. Thus, says Guénon, "…conceptions of space and time, despite the efforts of modern mathematicians, can never be exclusively quantitative."[11]

One should explain Guénon's thought further. Descartes sought to reduce the nature of bodies to extension, a purely quantitative attribute that could serve as the basis of an exclusively 'mechanistic theory.' However, as Guénon points out among other things, a given extended body of a particular size must necessarily have a particular shape that is not reducible to a quantitative attribute.[12] We would not say that a triangle and square of equal area are identical although they do have an equivalent size. Thus, Guénon concludes that the inability to treat extension as quantity and nothing more reveals the insufficiency of Cartesian mechanics and of the other physical theories derived more or less directly from it in modern times.

At the same time for Guénon the reduction of quality to quantity has significance beyond the physical sciences. The reduction of quality to quantity pervades most aspects of modern life and indeed for Guénon our age represents the reign of quantity over quality in socio-political matters that extend beyond the world of scientific inquiry. Following this line of

thought, the philosophical orientation represented by so called Post Modernity cannot be viewed as having reversed the Cartesian inheritance, which according to Guénon consists of a pervasive materialism and the tendency towards quantification. Post Modernity sees itself as a repudiation of the intellectual quest for absolutes. As we said earlier, thinkers that identify with Post Modernity hold that human methodologies, institutions, sciences, disciplines, intellectual systems and social ordering cannot derive a meaning from something external or transcendent to itself. For Guénon this view is not inconsistent with the intellectual tendencies of the modern world or the reign of quantity, he associates with Descartes. Guénon would observe that this position is entirely consistent with the view that a transcendent metaphysical reality is unknowable, thereby leaving humanity trapped within the materialistic confines of so called 'ordinary life'. Post Modernists might protest and claim that their position eschews both the absolutes of idealism and materialism. Regardless Guénon could rightly claim that Post Modernity represents a revised form of 'humanism', the reduction of everything to an exclusively human point of view, which goes hand in hand with the materialism of the modern age.[13] According to the leading thinkers of Post Modernity one cannot ask whether a given system is closer or farther from truth. Each system is embedded in a specific cultural milieu and belongs within a given form of life, to use a term frequently employed by Wittgenstein. Human symbols therefore, linguistic and otherwise, only have meaning within a specific human cultural context and are comprehensible only in so far as they are consistent with the practices that belong to that context. One cannot ask therefore whether our systems and representations speak to a truth or reality, which is independent of human activities and the immediate experience of particular cultural groupings.

Guénon entirely rejects the view that symbols and symbolic systems only have meaning through association with a given human activity representing some given form of cultural engagement. Guénon holds the position that meaningfulness can only be released through reference to a reality and truth that lies beyond human activities and mundane practices. In other words, meaning does not have a human source. The source is not subject to the creative activities of human beings but rather is the inspiration for human creativity and meaningful activity. When human beings fail to acknowledge this transcendent metaphysical reality and their thought fails to reflect this truth, human existence drifts towards meaninglessness and precarious instability. For Guénon it is not the case that all human practices and symbols are equally and relatively true so long as they are consistent with the cultural form of life followed by its practitioners. Consistency and coherence are not sufficient in themselves to endow validity, validity ultimately depends upon the capacity to reflect and convey transcendent eternal reality. Some philosophies and religions are superior because they strive to communicate this metaphysical reality. Others are not only less valid but decidedly invalid because they convey falsehoods that deny or

contradict these superior systems. It is clear that Guénon views the inheritance of Descartes, which he believes, promotes quantity over quality as entirely lacking validity, while promoting an ideology and an attitude to existence that turns away from the transcendent to a vacuous reliance upon the mundane, materialistic aspects of life.

Guénon explains that "…traditional science envisages essentially the higher of corresponding terms and allows no more that relative value to the lower term, and then only by virtue of correspondence with higher term, profane science on the other hand only takes account of the lower term, and being incapable of passing beyond the domain to which it is related, claims to reduce all reality to it".[14] By the higher we can interpret Guénon to mean the non-material principles or intellectual forms that give meaning to the material reality. In other words, once emphasis is given to the lower aspect, the material, the intellect finds itself incapable of moving beyond the lower level and thus struggles to relate all reality to the lower material level.

It is sufficient to say that the dominant trends in relatively recent twentieth-century philosophy, whether of continental or the Anglo-American variety, have failed to release us from the grip of Cartesianism. So called continental philosophy has been closely associated with the post modernist thought. Post modernism, as mentioned, does not promote any particular ontology, whether materialistic or idealistic, in so far as it rejects any reference to absolutes that would give meaning to human existence or symbolic systems. This, Guénon would assert, leaves us with a form of humanism that does not affirm anything beyond human creativity and engagement, a belief that dominates much of modern thought. Historically Anglo American philosophy that tends to distinguish itself from Continental trends has taken a decidedly materialist turn since the beginnings of the twentieth century. In the late nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century British Idealism, which derives its inspiration from German Idealism and especially G.W.F. Hegel, was a strong presence in British intellectual life. This movement challenged traditional British empiricism, which grounded epistemic activities in immediate experience. Nevertheless British Idealism was superseded by logical positivism that stipulated that not only knowledge but meaning itself is grounded in the immediate such that meaningful linguistic symbols must have verifiable referents that can ultimately be confirmed through immediate sense experience. Obviously, since metaphysical reality by definition is not accessible to sense confirmation, it was declared devoid of meaning, and the only meaningful language would be one that reflects and describes the material world. This materialist trend continued to intensify in philosophies of mind that sought to reduce mental states to physical states, which Guénon would argue is an obvious example of the tendency to reduce the higher to the lower.

It is worth noting here that Guénon distinguishes between intellect and reason.[15] Pure transcendent intellectual knowledge is contrary to rational knowledge, he says. The infinite can only be grasped directly by an immediate intuition that belongs to the domain of pure intellectuality.

Reason deals with the products of thought, for example proofs of God's existence. Reason thus is only a preparation for the intuition that consists of data that are not the product of thought with a supra-individual, non-human origin.

However intellectual intuition cannot be achieved without the necessity of an initiatic affiliation, Guénon says.[16] He speaks of the transmission of a spiritual influence in a seed state. The transmission of a certain spiritual influence can only be operational by means of a rite, which is precisely what affectuates the affiliation of one to an organization. The chief function of the organization is to conserve and communicate this influence.[17] The rites confer aptitudes that cannot be acquired otherwise. Initiation offers the beginning of a new existence in the course of which possibilities of another order will be developed. Initiation he says is indispensable in our present state. Spiritual states, he says, developed naturally and spontaneously in primordial times and initiation was not necessary by reason of the proximity of the Principle.[18] The cyclical conditions in which we find ourselves at present are altogether different and restoration of the primordial state is the goal that initiation sets for itself.

The age that has begun with Descartes and now has become the reign of quantity according to Guénon, represents a cycle, which is moving towards an end that he labels the "end of the world."[19] However this end will also mark the beginning of another age, or Manvantara. Guénon uses the concept of the end of the world to signify those for whom nothing can exist outside the present cycle.[20] For these people the end of the present cycle must really be the end of the world. He argues that these are the people who cannot resolve the duality they see in all things and fail to resolve this duality by referring it to a higher principle. The duality is irreducible and they deny the Supreme Unity. This he says is the worst delusion and such people are not merely led seriously astray they are irredeemably lost.[21] This all needs to put in context. The process from beginning to end appears to be a degradation or descent and exhibits a malefic aspect. But the manifestation when put back into the whole of which it the part can be viewed positively as "the immediate principle of another cycle of manifestation."[22] This, he says, constitutes the benefic aspect. The end of the world is the end of a delusion in which individuals find themselves irredeemably lost.

## SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The tendency to bring everything to the quantitative is most marked in the scientific conceptions of the recent centuries, but he says, it is as almost conspicuous in other domains – notably social organization. The reign of quantity makes it possible that the opinion of the majority can be taken into consideration at all – a definite rejection of the democratic Ideal.[23] For Guénon it is contact with the metaphysical reality that allows us to derive a body of principles that facilitate a non-human way to analyze and organize

human affairs. In properly situating and organizing mundane activities in this way we bestow on them a higher meaning.[24] For Guénon the deductions from these principles assume a radical character that is hierarchical, aristocratic and anti-collectivist. Guénon's world of principles are forces not abstractions. These are intelligences that regulate history and its great spiritual laws such as cyclical laws. Symbols and myths are important because they are viewed an expression of elements imbued with metaphysical character.

The universal for Guénon is true as a hierarchical apex.[25] It is the spiritual and unchanging unity towards which every particular reality converges and from which it derives its order, its meaning and reason of being. This applies to every domain including the social-political and religious ones. The traditional hierarchical ideal expressed in political systems is one in which individuals in virtue of performing a function conforming to their nature and natural vocation, are gathered together in classes or castes. Each caste has its prerogatives, features and rights and is arranged in a strict hierarchical order that safeguards the primacy of the spiritual over the temporal. Guénon often refers to the hierarchical system of the old Hindu society in which the merchant class presided over the working class, and the warrior aristocracy over the merchant class. There were elites who represented pure spiritual authority and pure intellectual (metaphysical) knowledge.[26] This social order also existed in the West up to the Middle Ages during which the super-rational division of people was made into separate classes of commoners, third estate, nobility and clergy. Taking into account the present historical cycle in which we find ourselves, Guénon sees the descent of political power from the higher to the lower castes – from the spiritual elites to warrior castes, from the warrior class to the capitalist, and from the capitalist bourgeoisie to the masses.[27] Guénon points to an equivalence found in the four Hindu Yugas with the four ages of Gold, Silver, Bronze and Iron as known in Greco-Latin antiquity as each period is marked by a degeneration in regard to the age that preceeded it. Each cyclical development is seen as a manifestation that marks a descent since it implies a gradual distancing from principle and moreover, he says this is the real meaning of the fall in the Judeo-Christian tradition.[28]

One should perhaps contrast these views with those of Maritain. Maritain was a passionate believer in democracy, which he said designates first and foremost a general philosophy of human and political life.[29] According to this view democratic regimes are not the only good regimes, but all good regimes will have to embody the dynamism of respect for free persons and their consent. Respect for persons is grounded in the Thomistic understanding of human dignity, claims Maritain. Democracy is meant to be a constitutional democracy based on constitutions that have at least three characteristics: formation through the consent of the governed; protection of "the essential bases" of common life and respect for human dignity and the rights of the person. Maritain affirms that democracy is linked to Christianity and the democratic impulse has arisen in human history as a

temporal manifestation of the inspiration of the Gospel. However, at the same time he affirms that the Christian faith demands every Christian be a democrat, which would be to mix the things of Caesar and things of God.[30] Here, I think, exists the chief difference between Guénon and Maritain. For Guénon the spiritual principles must penetrate social political life to realize the proper order. They cannot be confined to separate spheres. Moreover Maritain's respect for the individual person and the promotion of human rights seem to indicate a belief in the equality of human beings whereas Guénon believes in a fundamental inequality as found in the Caste system. The lower therefore owe obedience to the higher, their proper leaders, and legitimization does not proceed from the consent of the governed but because of a linkage between the leadership and the higher Principle. To do otherwise represents the reign of quantity and the inversion of values in which the lower dominates the higher.

As a final note I would like to point out that Maritain actually departs from St Thomas' Aristotelian roots in his strong support of equal human rights and democracy. It needs to be underlined that Aquinas effectively rejected democratic rule stating "one man rules better than several who come near being one." A single ruler is able to form and preserve a unity which is called peace, he claims. In contrast he says "the multitude in its disagreement becomes a burden to itself."[31] However, Aquinas does admit that the king's absolute rule must be tempered because of potential dissention due to the aspiration of all people to liberty and equality. Realistically, he sees monarchy can only be maintained if these conditions are met. Nevertheless, ultimately the diversity to be found in the state implies inequality. A fundamental inequality is to be found in the very great superiority of the king. For Aquinas the king must be "…super-excellent in all good endowments of mind and body and external belongings."[32] These views are close to the spirit of perfectionism as advocated by Aristotle. Aristotle believed that greater rights and privileges should be accorded to those individuals who excelled in human achievement particularly in intellectual endeavors. On the other hand it is clear that Guénon regards himself as much closer to this Classical Aristotelian tradition, which elevates an intellectual and spiritual elite to authority over the mass of humanity. Ultimately Guénon believed intelligibility and meaning have their source in hierarchical arrangements in which the embodiment of the qualitatively-determined higher principle maintains authority over the lower. Accordingly, he could not accept a political arrangement in which the quantified aggregation of numerous personal preferences as expressed through electoral politics is thought to constitute meaningful public policy.

**NOTES**

[1] René Guénon, *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, tr. H.D. Fohr & S.D. Fohr (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 61.

[2] Guénon, *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, 63

[3] Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, tr. M. L. Andison (London: Editions Poetry, 1946), 38.

[4] Guénon speaks of the prestige attributed to certain words – a prestige all the greater because the idea evoked by the work is the vague and inconsistent. The influence exercised by such words has in fact never been as great as in our time. The effect is psychological but also produces sentimental action and thus falls within the most illusionary of domains. This is not to say that such action is harmless. These subjective illusions however insignificant in themselves, nevertheless have real consequences in human activity. Above all they contribute greatly to the destruction of all true intellectuality which moreover is probably the chief function assigned them in the 'plan' of the modern subversion (René Guénon, *Miscellanea* (Hillsdale N.Y.: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 121). As examples he mentions the superstitions of 'reason' (end of the eighteenth century) 'science', 'progress' (nineteenth century) 'value' (twentieth century).

[5] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, tr. J. Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[6] Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, 135.

[7] Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, 135.

[8] Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, 142.

[9] Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, 143.

[10] René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* tr. Lord Northbourne (Hillsdale N.Y.: Sophia Perennis, 2004)., 20

[11] Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 22.

[12] Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 34.

[13] Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 103.

[14] Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 3.

[15] René Guénon, *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, 5.

[16] Guénon, *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, 28.

[17] Guénon, *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, 29.

[18] Guénon, *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, 27.

[19] Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 275.

[20] Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 276.

[21] Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 277.

[22] Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 278.

[23] Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity*, 4.

[24] Julius Evola, *René Guénon, A Teacher for Modern Times*, tr. G. Stucco (Sequim WA.: Holmes Publishing, 2004). 17

[25] Evola, *René Guénon*, 17.

[26] Evola, *René Guénon*, 18.

[27] Evola, *René Guénon*, 19.

[28] René Guénon, *Traditional Forms and Cosmic Cycles,* trans. H. D. Fohr (Hillsdale, N.Y.: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 5.

[29] Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 33.

[30] Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, 37.

[31] St Thomas Aquinas, *De Regimine Principum* P I, 17 in D. Bigongiari (ed.), *The Political Ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: The Free Press 1997), 179-180.

[32] St. Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, viii, 10 quoted in the "Introduction" in D. Bigongiari (ed.), *The Political Ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas*, xxviii.

**PART IV**


**SPECIFIC AREAS OF INTELLIGIBILITY:**
**KNOWING GOD AND THE HUMAN PERSON**

**CHAPTER VIII**

# MARITAIN AND INTELLECTUAL MYSTICISM

*DAVID C. BELLUSCI*


**INTRODUCTION**

On what basis can the intellectual approaches to God lead to the transcendental experiences of God?[1] The "ways" to God that Jacques Maritain develops draws from Saint Thomas Aquinas.[2] The largely Aristotelian features of the pre-philosophical approach, and Maritain's own sixth way to God, emphasise the role of the intellect in experiences with the Transcendent.[3] Maritain also considers the practical intellect in poetic experience comparing this to experiences of mysticism. I shall take up the practical intellect towards the end of my paper. Difficulties that Maritain addresses also have to do with the philosophy-theology interface.[4] My interest in this paper is to determine to what extent Maritain's approaches to God lean towards idealism. I shall set out to consider Maritain's approaches and the idealist elements that may be suggestive of each.

**PRE-PHILOSOPHICAL WAY**

In *Approches de Dieu,* Maritain gives six "approaches" to God, and with the sixth approach the intellect shows the ability to embrace reality to include the existence of God. But first, Maritain establishes the pre-philosophical approach to God which concerns basic knowledge about the Divine. He refers to this stage as *primordiale* in which one possesses a natural pre-philosophic knowledge of God. In the case of natural knowledge, Maritain regards this as understanding that relies on reason rather than faith, and in the case of pre-philosophic knowledge, this cognitive awareness of the Divine proceeds instinctively before any kind of philosophical or scientific enquiry.[5] The intuitive and pre-philosophical stage itself creates some problems, the primordial beginning before the six ways are introduced: it would appear that this intuitive pre-rational knowledge of the Divine suggests something innate, a knowledge of God that exists within: an idea of the Divine that will become intelligible through human experience, and reason.

The pre-philosophical approach relies on *l'intuition naturelle de l'être,* the act of existing.[6] Soon after affirming the intuitive character of the act of existing, Maritain juxtaposes this to the abstract dream-world constructed of images, words, signs and symbols. We know that we exist intuitively, without giving the matter much thought, but the symbolic world requires interpretation, meaning to it is given. The structures of reality, the act of existing, which are naturally intelligible, Maritain contrasts to the

abstract world of the non-real, in which meaning is constructed, learned and interpreted. The rude reality of *j'existe,* of our own existence, and the existence of things, means that we possess the intuition of being.

To affirm the existence of my being, also means to affirm the possibility of my own death and nothingness. The solidity and certitude of my existence, and yet its vulnerability, leads to the assertion that while my being is threatened by the nothingness of being, there is a being beyond death and nothingness - the source of my own being, *l'être sans néant.*[7] In fact, the move that Maritain makes from being to nothingness and to Being is the solution to nothingness: to posit Being, as source, a being-without-nothingness. This Being is a possibility when we accept the intuitive knowledge of being, that there must be a source to the fragile being of our existence. The idea of "Being" then follows this primordial intuition.

In other words, in the primordial approach, the subjective tension between being and nothingness lead to the objective transcendent being. "Being-without-nothingness" would have to exist apart from the world that is "Being-with-nothingness." God's existence is beyond demonstrations, outside of arguments of evidence, as Maritain maintains: one cannot contain God within the confines of human reason; but reason shows that God "is," and the recognition of God's being is that which leads one to awe, to admiration and adoration.[8] Maritain shows that the ways leading to God are not really demonstrations or evidence, but rather he is establishing a relationship of radical dependence on the Divine; through intuitive knowledge we come to recognise the source of being.

## THOMISTIC SOURCES

Having considered the pre-philosophical approach to God, Maritain devotes the following section to the first way of Saint Thomas. A transition is made from the pre-philosophical and intuitive to the rational and philosophical; the central point that is affirmed is the capacity and object of the intelligence: what it seeks in things is Being and it is Being that is attainable by the intellect.[9] Maritain underscores the difference between being and Being and that both "being" and "Being" are accessible to the intelligence. While in each object being is different *tout en étant saisi dans la même ideé d'être et exprimé par le même mot.*[10] The approach to being shares a property with the pre-philosophical way to the Transcendent: while in the former an intuitive knowledge of being is recognised, that something "is," the way to being depends once again on this intuitive knowledge which Maritain expresses as an *idée d'être*. The differences of objects, and the being individuating these objects, captures their being based on the same "idea" of being. Present, therefore, is the objective thing before the thinking subject, but the idea contained by the latter permits grasping "being."

In the Thomistic tradition this grasping being through the intelligence is referred to the "analogy of being" and of "transcendentals." These distinctions that are made in the Thomistic tradition have

fundamental metaphysical (and therefore theological) implications. The analogy of being expresses the difference that exists in each being which extends to "Being" itself; when we grasp this it is based on the same idea of being. The same idea of "being" present in the thinking subject is not the same "being" in the object. If the analogy of being is not recognised, we are led to the univocity of being which is what Maritain intends when the "same idea" is not differentiated. A crucial point is the idea that we have based on our experiences enables us to grasp "being"; nevertheless, being cannot be limited to our ideas which derive from experience, but go beyond them, or transcend them, outside the reach of human experience and knowable only through human intelligence. The use of analogy in the Thomistic tradition is a means of grasping Being, "the notion used about one of the things is not totally the same, not totally different, from that used about another."[11]

The suprasensory knowledge of ascertaining "being" does not exclude experience, but it cannot be limited to sensory experience, either. The being of things while knowable by the intellect defies sight and touch. Maritain acknowledges the role of ideas in coming to the non-sensory knowledge of being: ideas do not immediately grasp being but some of the ideas possessed by individuals, given the object of these ideas, transcend experience attaining the invisible realm of non-sensory reality; these supra-sensorial things are known to the sensorial through a relation of similitude. The idea is more than just a resemblance contained in the person to external reality; the idea permits the person to transcend the material world to attain non-sensory truths. This resemblance between the visible and invisible, referred to analogy in the Thomistic tradition, is mediated through the "idea." The centrality of being for Maritain is made evident when he re-examines the implications of Saint Thomas's five ways and affirms that in each of the five ways there is a formal principle in the demonstration, that of "Being."[12]

## MOTION: THE FIRST APPROACH[13]

The world of motion is associated with change and becoming. To change is fundamentally "to pass from being in potency to being in act."[14] Maritain raises the problem of whether a thing ever is, if it is always becoming, moving from potency to act: change implies potency and act, for something already is before it changes, and in order for it to change, in potency, as it becomes what it is going to become. In this process of what something has been in reality, what it is no longer, and what it is becoming, what it was can only be isolated by the mind.[15] This claim Maritain makes is crucial: he maintains that while change takes place, it is in the mind that the unity of being and becoming, act and potency, remain present.[16]

**EFFICIENT CAUSALITY: SECOND APPROACH**

Examining Saint Thomas's Second Way which focuses on efficient causality, Maritain notes that the First Cause is not intended to be understood in temporal terms, but rather First Cause in being, in terms of intelligibility and causality. These causal relations are super-ordinated to one another logically and in their "intelligible conditioning."[17] This means rather than looking at causality in terms of temporal succession, causality is to be viewed in terms of causal relations of connections that together provide intelligibility. The intelligibility of a First Cause exists in its own right, that is, an intelligibility *par soi d'une cause première, qui existe par soi.*[18] A distinction can be made between horizontal and vertical causality: horizontal causality is homogenous in which living beings generate living beings and a series of existences occur at the same level.[19] This differs from vertical causality in which the First Cause, *embrasse et domine sans succession toute la succession du temps, elle est à chaque instant suprême raison d'être de l'exercice de la causalité de tous les agents qui agissent à ce même instant dans le monde.*[20] This vertical causality in this sense is heterogeneous, unlike the homogenous character of horizontal causality. This means that vertical causality leads to a cause that is at a different level as a transcendent being, and with a separate nature.[21]

This vertical super-ordination also permits the transition to the Infinite which differs from the logical movement leading to the infinite from cause to cause. This suggests that there really is no First Mover since the First Cause is not "first" in a series, but something beyond a numerical sequence understood in temporal terms of temporal relations.[22] It is the universe itself *avec toutes ses natures et les constellations de causes qui en dépendent, qui est 'premier mobile' au regard de la cause première transcendante.*[23] Maritain maintains the distinction between First Cause and First Mover, only that the two are not analogous: it is the First Cause that transcends the latter by identifying the First Mover with the universe itself with its natures and dependent constellations.

**THIRD APPROACH: CONTINGENCY/NECESSITY**

I would like to examine this section on contingency and necessity, taking Maritain, perhaps, in a manner that he had not intended: by looking at the "nothing at all" in relation to contingency. Maritain's main argument to posit necessity is that if everything were contingent, in perpetual flux, with no necessity, nothing would exist. My approach to his assertion is not so much concerning its metaphysical weight, but for the first time, Maritain moves into the direction of a mysticism not in the sense of a transcendent being, but through an apophatic approach to the Transcendent, the *via negativa* leading to nothingness.[24] While there are metaphysical reasons justifying necessity, the contingent world producing an ongoing state of flux without anything stable, definite, certain or absolute, the un-answerable, the

un-knowing and un-certain collapse into nothingness, paradoxically, leaving us with a transcendent Nothing.[25] Maritain's third approach to God, in fact, drawing from contingency and necessity, does not deny the existence of God, but places God outside of contingency and necessity. The intellect here serves not to grasp being, but rather, fails to grasp being in the profound mystery of God's otherness and transcendence. The cosmos is the theatre of contingency and Maritain looks upon the stars as well as plants to demonstrate the implications of contingency, destruction and production, including that of human life.[26] Contingency seems to suggest that existence itself is contingent: something may not exist; things possess existence in a contingent way. It is the negation of existence that leads Maritain to posit necessity. And yet, it is this very negation that leaves us in "awe" of the unknown, the mystery of transcendence that relies on contingency. In other words, if we turn Maritain's series of negations, not to posit necessity, but the mystery of nothingness – "And therefore right now nothing would be existing" – the Transcendent is not denied, but its unknowability is affirmed.

## FOURTH APPROACH: DEGREE

In Saint Thomas's fourth way, the degrees of things reveal that not all objects possess the same qualitative properties as in things beautiful and things good, knowledge based on reason, compared to knowledge derived from the senses. If "more or less" exists as a comparative degree, this must be relative to a superlative "most" which exists somewhere so that superlative values exist of beauty and goodness, knowledge and sense. These qualities are not superlative in themselves since they participate in a highest quality from which they can derive the "more or less" good or beautiful or knowledge. These qualities are caused deriving from the source in which these qualities participate: the First Cause of properties is the essence of properties of which it is cause, it "is" Beautifulness, it "is" Goodness, it "is" Truth.

The significance of this fourth way is that it relates to the transcendental and analogous values of things. In this respect, value is understood as both ontological and logical truth, that is, the truth of things, and the truth that the intellect knows, respectively. Maritain shows the importance of the "idea" by asserting that the idea of number relies on human sensory experience but once the intellect moves outside of sensory experience, *elle le met en face d'un monde objectif qui n'existe sans doute que dans l'esprit, mais comme un univers posé pour lui-même et indépendant de nous, consistant et inépuisable.…*[27] Two crucial points are made in the statement: (i) reference to a world that exists only in the mind, this is a qualifying phrase in reference to the idea, and (ii) the independence of the world which is not constructed by the individual, but which can nevertheless be penetrated by the intellect. The role of the intellect enables the object from the outside sensory world to be elevated in the scale of truth,

from the sensory, to the being of an object. Maritain acknowledges this capacity of adequation of mind and being as penetrating the transcendent First Cause which is subsistent Truth.[28] What makes the First Being truly God is both infinite transcendence and essential and infinite distinction from all other beings. It is this First Cause which causes in the sense of creating.

## FIFTH WAY: GOVERNANCE

Similar to the third way of contingence and necessity, the fifth way takes on further cosmic expression. The world has a purpose and is oriented towards an end. This is not a mechanical order as though the world functions like a machine, but rather things interacting in relation to one another with their ontological structure. The intellect operates in things with knowledge and understanding, but for things devoid of intelligence, they depend upon an omnipresent intellect which is distinct and separate from these things. It is a transcendent First Cause which brings the intentions of things into being. Maritain clearly states, *et qui la [the intention] fasse passer dans l'être….* The significance of Maritain's assertion is that "intention" is communicated to being. What is this intentionality that is communicated coming from the First Cause, if nothing other than Divine Intelligence and Goodness. Maritain recognises a union between intelligent beings, Divine and human. It is through the divine mind that the person receives intelligence and intention. The person is the icon of God.

## MARITAIN'S SIXTH WAY

The pre-philosophical and philosophical approaches to God lead to the sixth way; this approach to God emerges from the intuitive and rational ways to the Transcendent. In this sixth way the emphasis is on the intuitive, that which had been presented as part of the pre-philosophical way to God. But intuition is redeveloped in the sixth way so that it is more than being associated with primordial life, or "existing"; it is the intuition that presupposes the life of the intellect: intuition has been experienced and so an approach to God brings this intuitive experience with it. Intuition at this stage belongs to the "natural spirituality of intelligence."[29]

Reflecting on the natural spirituality of the intelligence in its nascent form, Maritain seems to echo Descartes, in which the question is asked, "how is it possible that I was born?" and he continues several lines later, *Ainsi moi qui suis maintenant dans l'acte de penser j'ai toujours existé: cette vue s'impose à moi et ne me paraît bizarre que si je m'en retire pour la considérer dehors.*[30] The probing question develops along two Aristotelian lines, "life proportioned to man" and "life proportioned to the intellect."[31] The first type of intellectual activity refers to activities in time involving both the senses and imagination guided by the intellect, while the second type is where the intellect is withdrawn into thought, above the senses and imagination, and is concerned primarily with intelligible objects.

It is in this latter use of the intellect in which the person is engaged in intuitive activity.

Maritain juxtaposes the process of intellectual activity with the question of nothingness, *ait été pur néant.*[32] The fact is that a thinking being could not have previously been pure nothing. The analogy that Maritain gives, serves to show that we do not just come into existence: "It is as if I were in a room and, without my having left for an instant, someone were to say to me that I just came in – I know that what he says is impossible."[33] With this comparison to express human existence, it would appear that the individual has "always" existed, and, this is precisely the assertion that Maritain makes, "I who am now in the act of thinking have always existed." Related to having always existed is the "natural" spirituality within the person, something that is present by nature; this does not favour the possibility of this spiritual being to have emerged from nothingness. The juxtaposition of a bodily birth which is fixed in time and place, seems to contradict the natural spiritual presence that cannot come out of nothingness. The notion of nothingness for Maritain is not seen as something positive: God is identified as an intelligible thing, rather than "no-thing." It is in this "nothingness" that we also came across in the third way of contingency and necessity that leads to the apophatic mysticism unintended by Maritain. It is the way of affirmation rather than negation that gives intelligible structure to the Divine for Maritain. This is why intuition plays a central role in his philosophy both the pre-philosophical and the sixth way: we have this natural "idea" about God.

The solution to the impasse, seeking an affirmation, something cannot come out of nothing, Maritain posits a suprapersonal existence in a transcendent Being in which the perfection of human thought existed.[34] This existence refers to a "supereminent" mode. This Being, as Saint Thomas also acknowledges, is the eternal Being who must have existed before the temporal existence of the individual. But this person had an "eternal existence in God" before any individuation. The distinction which has been made between the temporal corporality of existence and the eternal spiritual existence resurfaces in terms of the spiritual being outside of the temporal sphere, *intellectus supra tempus.* As a result, the intellect is seen as being subjected to time only as far as the senses and the imagination, to which the intellect is attached for its temporal existence, is attached to time. But the exercise of the intellect is not subject to time. If the exercise of the intellect is attached to a material body of senses and imagination, the imitation of eternity suggests a deficiency, a duration of "successive fragments" of eternity.[35] These successive fragments of eternity are in the "contemplative gaze" that is the "spiritual acts of intellection"; as a result, spiritual events are regarded as "metahistorical."[36]

The sixth way focusses on the self, as it emerges in time, and its eternal, albeit created, pre-existence. The relationship between thought as spiritual and thought as temporal raises precisely the question of where to place the self: In time? Beyond time? There are two answers to the problem:

(i) the self as being born in time, the corporality of being; and (ii) thought itself is supratemporal existing outside the temporal, existing in terms of its being and personality. This is only possible through the participation in the First Being, and as Saint Thomas shows in the Fourth Way, participation is best accounted for through the more or less of degrees. As we have seen, this means that this First Being would contain in an eminent mode being, thought and personality, in a manner that is transcendent and absolute. This pure act of Being is that from which all other sources of being derive.

We might ask how one can exist in God or what does this mean to pre-exist eminently in an absolutely transcendent Being. The explanation to this is that one pre-exists in God according to how God knows things, present to the divine intellect, participating in the divine essence. These natures live in God by the God who knows them, and a more perfect existence than in their own natures. The upshot is that the person does not come into existence through the materiality of the temporal, the temporal nature, but the person has always existed as a spiritual being in the mind of God participating in the divine essence, even before a temporal existence has been given. God has an idea of us in the Divine Mind before this idea is brought into the temporal order. The idea is the pre-existence and perfect existence of our being, in the mind of God. Confusion needs to be avoided here since this does not mean that the person existed in God as though it exercises thought separately from God, since it is the Divine Being that thinks in God and no other being. The individual personality existed in God as thought and created in the mind of God, "the Self thinking and thinking itself."[37] In this sense spiritual life exists in the image of God.

## PRACTICAL INTELLECT

There is also a less speculative approach to God, one that belongs to the practical intellect, and is also associated with the pre-philosophical line of thinking, these draw from poetry and beauty, the artistic dimension of human experience. As a perfection in things that transcends things, beauty is a transcendental, mirroring something of the Infinite which is infinite beauty. This leads to a different kind of knowledge, beauty relates to the domain of affective knowledge, rather than the rational and conceptual. Beauty is the affective experience, the nostalgia and not just the joy, of an awesome presence. The affective inclination towards God through the beauty of art, the artist's creative experience, reflects a spiritual movement although without a rational basis, nevertheless, representing an intuitive movement towards the transcendent as a result of beauty's creative experience. Poetic beauty serves well to illustrate this creative spirit.

Maritain maintains that poetic experience differs from mystical experience: poetic experience 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 beings in its universality, superior to the world.[38] I would take note here how the

affective dimension associated with beauty is de-emphasised by Maritain, who seems to prefer a mysticism that he identifies with an intellective and rational approach.[39]

The significant difference between poetic and mystical experience is that the former deals with the subjective experience of the created world, and the emotions that derive from such experience, while in the latter the experience with the Transcendent is the result of *concentration purement intellectuelle*.[40] The two are not entirely separate: the created world belonging to poetry inclines one to the experience of the transcendent, and therefore, to mystical experience of the world beyond the created world. Unlike the emotions involved in poetic experience, in the encounter with the Transcendent, one's emotions disappear, and a void is experienced, as Maritain states, "Poetic experience is from the beginning oriented towards expression and terminates in an uttered word; mystical experience tends toward silence and terminates in an immanent fruition of the absolute."[41] The cognitive parallel between poetic and mystical experience is one of unknowing and knowing, respectively: the experience of the poet concerns created things, and while the mystic approaches God in conceptual terms, for the poet it is the affective union of love.

In this last section the definition of mystical experience is given in contrast to poetic experience: the former expresses a rational process that does not suggest the affective union that motivates the human inclination towards the Transcendent, but rather, a union inclined at a supernatural level. In this sense mystical experience can be described as an experiential knowledge of things of the Divine.[42] This experiential knowledge can be further defined as a "passion" for things Divine. Taking the view of Saint John of the Cross, this passion leads the soul to a series of successive transformations, until the depths of the soul's being "feels the life of God."[43] Metaphysics "naturally" inclines the intelligence towards the non-material world a desire for knowledge that remains unfulfilled, the individual remains deficient in fulfilling this inclination beyond things material.[44] This inclination, not unlike the artistic experience, seems indeterminate and confused, but this desire is progressively realised through mystical experience.

**MARITAIN AND IDEALISM?**

In this last section I would like to consider, given Maritain's approaches to God, to what extent idealist elements are present. My objective here is not to determine the meaning of "idealism" since the word contains many meanings and connotations. It seems that there are elements in Maritain's thoughts, at least in terms of approaches to God, that lend towards idealism. The idealism I have in mind can be defined as follows: a kind of monistic absolutism in which everything that is real is informed and ordered by the Idea, and in this case, Being.[45] We would need to transcend sensory experience, although the starting point would be our senses, united with this

intuitive knowledge that we have of being. Sense-experience plays a role in the rational process, but we need to go beyond the senses in intellective activity in order to reach the metaphysical principles. Reality is unified under one principle, in this case Being. I would also point out how Maritain defined mystical experience above, "mystical experience lends toward silence and terminates in an immanent fruition of the absolute." The absence of sensory experience results in silence such that the mystical experience of the Absolute is where one transcends the world of senses, and comes to know Being, and "experiencing" the Absolute. This intuitive idea of God as Being for Maritain is not the affective union associated with the poetic experience of love, but the awesome presence of Transcendence.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper I have shown the approaches that Maritain employs to come to know God. I have focussed on the significance of the pre-philosophical approach as well as the sixth way, given their importance for some idealist elements in Maritain's writings. I have maintained that in each of these approaches to God, the intuitive knowledge of being, and transcendence, suggests parallels with some definitions of Idealism. I have given one such definition highlighting the significance of the Absolute and how it informs; in the case of Maritain's writings, how Being communicates itself, through the pre-existent idea of the individual in the Divine Mind, and the person's participation in the Divine. It is this participation in the Divine, and the intuitive knowledge of Being, which suggest that Maritain and his intellectual mysticism contain Idealist elements.

**NOTES**

[1] Louis Roy, O.P. raises this question in "Wainwright, Maritain and Aquinas on Transcendent Experiences," *The Thomist* 54 (1990): 655-72, at 655.

[2] Jacques Maritain, *Approches de Dieu* (Paris: Alsatia, 1953). Maritain uses the word *approche* to indicate these different conceptual paths in which one comes to know God. He also takes into account the different terms employed by philosophers such as "proofs," "demonstrations," "ways" to show the human capacity to reach knowledge of the Transcendent.

[3] Maritain's over-emphasis on the intellect is criticised by Roy believing Maritain focusses on the concept at the expense of the role of human affectivity. See "Transcendent Experiences," 670-72.

[4] The role of faith in the experience with God had already been examined in his earlier work, *Les Degrés du Savoir* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1932).

[5] The relationship between nature and grace is taken up in detail in the *Degrés;* Maritain asks whether it is at all possible to have any

experience of God without grace? Since Maritain answers this question in the negative, that without grace one cannot know God, he has grace already at work in human nature. This is less pronounced in the *Approches* where the supernatural state is to see the essence of God (123-24), while in the *Degrés* the tension between the natural and supernatural is clearly present (549-70).

[6] Maritain, *Approches,* 11.

[7] Maritain, *Approches,* 13, "being without nothingness."

[8] While this contemplative disposition is strong in Maritain as he follows Saint Thomas Aquinas, Roy's criticism is that Maritain remains too conceptual in his approach to contemplation in which the affectivity brought upon by love is either absent or weak, "Transcendent Experiences," 671.

[9] Maritain, *Approches,* 29.

[10] Maritain, *Approches,* 29. The English translation reads, "while being grasped in the same idea of Being and expressed by the same word…" *Approaches to God,* translated from the French by Peter O'Reilly (New York: Macmillan, 1967). All English translations are taken from Peter O'Reilly.

[11] For the details connected to this assertion see Lawrence Dewan, O.P. "Does Being have a Nature? (Or: Metaphysics as a Science of the Real)," in *Approaches to Metaphysics,* William Sweet, ed. (Dordecht: Kluwer, 2004) :23-25, at 24. Dewan's article gives a detailed account on the analogy of being by examining John Capreolus's response to Peter Aureol and John Duns Scotus. See especially 26-31, 35, 48.

[12] Maritain, *Approches,* 32.

[13] For the five ways, see Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,*1.2.3.

[14] Maritain, *Approches,* 33.

[15] Maritain, *Approches,* 35. Maritain uses the word *esprit* translated in English as "mind."

[16] I will take up a definition for "idea" in section 10 of this paper where I consider how Maritain's ontology lends towards idealism.

[17] Maritain, *Approches,* 46.

[18] Maritain, *Approches,* 46.

[19] Maritain, *Approches,* 46.

[20] Maritain, *Approches,* 47. "The causality of the First Cause embraces and dominates without succession the whole succession of time; it is at each moment the ultimate foundation of the exercise of the causality of all the agents which act at the same moment in the world."

[21] Maritain, *Approches,* 47-48.

[22] Maritain, *Approches,* 49.

[23] Maritain, *Approches*, 49. "…with all the natures and clusters of causes dependent upon these natures, which is the 'first mobile' in relation to the transcendent First Cause."

[24] Although I do not believe this is what Maritain had intended, since he wishes to posit the need for necessity, nevertheless, the approach he has taken, the nothingness he leaves us with, falls within the tradition of apophatic mysticism.

[25] Both in the Neoplatonic tradition (especially Gregory of Nyssa) and the tradition of the Dominican, Meister Eckhart, Nothingness is beyond "God."

[26] Maritain, *Approches,* 54.

[27] Maritain, *Approches,* 65. The O'Reilly translation reads, "…it places the intellect itself in the presence of an objective world, a world which exists, no doubt, only in the mind, but which nevertheless exists as a universe set out for itself and independent of us, consistent and inexhaustible…."

[28] Maritain, *Approches,* 66.

[29] Maritain, *Approches,* 82.

[30] Maritain, *Approches,* 84, "Thus, I who am now in the act of thinking have always existed. This view imposes itself on me and does not seem strange to me unless I draw myself back from it in order to consider it from without."

[31] Maritain, *Approches,* 83.

[32] Maritain, *Approches,* 84, "was a pure nothing."

[33] Maritain, *Approches,* 83.

[34] Maritain, *Approches,* 83.

[35] Maritain, *Approches,* 86.

[36] Maritain, *Approches,* 86-87.

[37] Maritain, *Approches,* 91-92.

[38] Maritain, *Approches,* 99.

[39] As I noted in footnote 2, this de-emphasis on the affective has been criticised by Roy who maintains this is a departure from Saint Thomas's thought. See "Transcendent Experiences", 667-72.

[40] Maritain, *Approches,* 99.

[41] Maritain, *Approches,* 99-100.

[42] *Degrés,* 489-90.

[43] Saint John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love,* 1.1.

[44] *Degrés,* 562.

[45] This definition is based on Leslie Armour, *The Idealist Revival,* Chapter 12, "The Idealist Philosopher's God," Dominican University College seminar notes, 2002, 211.

# THE MYSTERY OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

*NIKOLAJ ZUNIC*

## INTRODUCTION

There are two prominent characteristics of our contemporary culture in the West which stand out as constitutive features of our way of life. The first is the apotheosis of a positivistic, scientific paradigm in epistemology. This is a form of rationality which esteems empirical verification as the unimpeachable and exclusive criterion of truth. According to this model, any claim to knowledge which cannot be tested and observed empirically is thus deemed to be false, or at any rate, suspect. The scientific method in the acquisition of knowledge is firmly ensconced in an attitude of objectification which can be described as a distinctive kind of intellectual comportment towards things. In the objectifying attitude the subject reduces otherness to something which is at one's disposal for the sake of acquiring epistemic knowledge which in turn is marked by the quality of certitude, that is, the quest for certainty. It would appear that the spirit of logical positivism, that obsolete philosophical ideology, is alive and well in our culture.[1]

The second dominant characteristic of contemporary Western society is a pervasive and deeply entrenched individualism which manifests itself in various ways, from the rights culture in the legal and political spheres to the widespread decline in participation in community and social institutions to a hedonistic and utilitarian ethical lifestyle which denigrates the domain of duties and responsibilities. The absolutization of the individual can only take place when the social and communal dimensions of being are simultaneously devalued and ultimately set on a path towards eventual dissolution. Individualism is such a patent element of our contemporary world, being the offspring of modernity, that to identify it as a characteristic feature of our self-understanding comes across more as a platitudinous statement than as an original discovery. Yet just as with our epistemological commitments, individualism seems to be increasingly heading in the extreme direction of atomism, an embraced ideology of the early modern era, as found in the works of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, but which has been strenuously criticized and rejected by numerous scholars in recent years.[2] The doctrine of atomism maintains that human nature is essentially disconnected from other human beings, residing in a purely solipsistic state.[3] It may appear to be commonsensical to denounce atomism as an exaggerated philosophical and political ideology that has no bearing on real life, but what is troubling is how this worldview has taken root in the

practical lives of citizens and continues to have its defenders in intellectual circles.[4]

I have intentionally brought these two phenomena of our contemporary world together onto the same stage because of the symbiotic relationship that exists between them. The insight underpinning this essay is that the objectifying attitude of the scientific paradigm of cognition is correlated with the rise of individualism in our societies. It is difficult, if not impossible, to point out whether a causal relationship exists between the two, and if so, what the precise nature of this relationship could be. Nonetheless, it is not merely coincidental that modernity has simultaneously given birth to these two manifestations of the human spirit. It can be asserted that positivism and individualism belong to the same attitude or disposition of the human subject in its relation to otherness. This is the view of the twentieth century French philosopher Gabriel Marcel who was a vocal critic of reductionism in human life, which can be described as the naïve simplification of realities by perniciously eliminating other essential aspects from their purview. For the danger which these attitudes pose is located in their extreme, absolutized forms. When positivistic knowledge is religiously taken to be the exclusive form of true knowledge, then other valid modes of cognition are ignored and dismissed, to the detriment of the truth-seeking spirit in each and every human being; and when our relationships with others are regarded as utterly inessential and dispensable, then individualism becomes inimical to a readily perceivable and deeply significant dimension of everyday human life which is that our relationships with others somehow mark out our own self-identity. The spirit of reductionism needs to be aggressively resisted wherever truth is pursued because it tends to distort our perception of reality.[5]

It will be useful, therefore, to explore the problems that are connected with reductionism, particularly in the two interrelated spheres of epistemology and anthropology as I have been presenting them in this paper. To do this I will follow Marcel's lead as he endeavours to combat false representations of the nature of knowledge and the essence of the human being. Marcel believed that the reality of intersubjectivity, which can be described as the ontological union of persons, arises in human consciousness not in the form of epistemic knowledge, but rather from out of the bosom of mystery, which is a participatory mode of being. To demonstrate the mystery of intersubjectivity I will first explore the concept of mystery which Marcel explains from the perspective of one's attitude towards one's own body. This will be followed by a discussion of intersubjectivity as illustrated through two crucial elements of human existence: the family and death.

**THE BODY AS THE GROUND OF MYSTERY**

Marcel envisages two distinct ways in which a human being can relate himself to otherness, taken in a generic sense, which is the basis upon which

understanding and cognition are founded. This is Marcel's well known distinction between a problem and a mystery. When the human subject seeks to distance himself from an object with the intention of controlling, mastering, or using it, he reduces the object to a problem. In the ordinary sense of the word, a problem is something that one finds puzzling or disconcerting, something which calls out to be fixed or remedied in some way. For example, when I am presented with a problem in mathematics, such as in a formal academic setting, my task is to solve it and to find the answer. The example of a mathematical problem is especially appropriate in elucidating the nature of a problem because my attempts to answer it are highly intellectual as I tax my mental energies to come up with the correct answer. In fact what I am seeking is a peculiar kind of knowledge, what philosophers call *epistemic knowledge*, according to the Greek sense of *episteme*, which has the quality of certainty or absoluteness attached to it. In this stance towards the object, the intellect strives to control and master it as it cognitively penetrates its essence. The only way that the subject can carry out this agenda is if he or she is removed or separated from the object. I place the object at a distance so that I can scrutinize it thoroughly as something that is independent of me. The act of objectification also isolates the human ego from the world of objects. This is precisely the methodology used in the natural sciences, where the pursuit of objective knowledge is the norm through the analysis and observation of physical entities. Indeed, scientific knowledge depends intrinsically on this attitude of objectification and the isolation of the ego.

It is interesting to notice that in a problem, insofar as it is a problem, the subject stands in a special relationship to the problematic situation. The subject experiences certain feelings of perplexity, bafflement, uneasiness and ignorance, for after all what one is dealing with in this instance is a *problem*, that is, a cause of concern of some sort. In this state of uneasiness the subject then typically endeavours to solve the problem, not only for the sake of the problem viewed from the point of view of the object under consideration, but also because the subject wishes to placate his or her own troubled subjectivity in this confrontation with the problem. Such a desire leads to a quest to discover a peace of mind and to silence the unsettling restlessness and agitation in the human soul. The intellect is used as the vehicle in this project to solve the problem and to overcome the state of uneasiness which is carried out in the pursuit of certain knowledge. This all makes sense because as long as the problem persists as a problem the subject does not really know what it is and thus continues to reside in a state of perplexity. It would not be an overly bold statement to suggest that human beings possess the inveterate trait of desiring to solve problems whenever they encounter them. Put differently, it would seem that leaving a problem unanswered and unexplored would be uncharacteristic of the human species, particularly in our current scientific age. To be precise, what I am trying to point out here in this delineation is that when the human being problematizes a reality what he or she is necessarily doing is seeking

to acquire intellectual certainty of this same reality and in the process to quell the uneasiness that he or she feels in the face of this problem.

Because we are dealing here with a determinate kind of subject-object relation, the manner by which this desired certitude is achieved takes place is predictably schematic. Marcel argues that the procedure human beings follow to solve problems is done through the adoption of specific techniques or technical knowledge.[6] There are three characteristics of a technique: (1) it is a specialized sort of knowledge, specific only to a particular domain of reality; (2) it can be improved and made perfect, in short, progress is possible; (3) it is a transmissible kind of knowledge, capable of being taught and learned by anyone. Problems are solved when I apply the rules and principles of my technical knowledge to overcome the insecurity and uncertainty that the problematic situation posed initially. So a mathematician will apply the theorems he has learned to solve certain math problems, the engineer will consult engineering manuals to address construction conundrums, and the lawyer will abide by the protocols of the legal profession in his advocacy of a cause in a court of law. To be sure, the end result of every application of a technique or technical knowledge is a solution or resolution to an originally unsettling and enigmatic situation. Marcel is clear that technical knowledge serves a useful and valuable purpose in our world and that it would be downright foolish to reject it as intrinsically harmful to the human condition. However, this positive estimation of techniques derives from an understanding of its proper application in a given situation. A technique is only a means to an end, not the end in itself. It is a tool or instrument which human beings use to achieve certain objectives, but the goals themselves are not established by the technique. Technical knowledge becomes oppressive when it is taken to be an end in itself, for example, when rules are followed for their own sake and not for the sake of the good which they were implemented to serve in the first place. We shall have more to say about the dominance of a technical attitude toward life later in the paper.

What is often left unrecognized in Marcel's philosophy is the pivotal position of the body in this distinction between problem and mystery. In fact, the locus of this all important distinction is nowhere other than in the body, more specifically, my body. As modernity has clearly demonstrated, as exemplified by Descartes, the human ego or self can separate itself from its body and treat it like a purely physical thing. In this posture of detachment or disengagement the body becomes for the subject a physical object like any other physical object in the world. It is thus subsumed under the laws of nature and undergoes the same processes that material things pass through. Marcel calls this the body-object and he asserts that this distinctive disposition towards my body by objectifying is the basis of all cognition.[7] Physical things in the world can then be observed and cognized because they are brought into a relation with my own body which is regarded as a mere thing. Hence the act of objectification, so

central to scientific, positivist knowledge, is actually made possible by virtue of a human subject's attitude towards his or her own body.

When the body is not looked upon as a mere material object but resides in an intimate union with the soul, this is when we are dealing with another kind of body, what Marcel calls the body-subject. In this situation the body is an essential part of the human self. A key anthropological doctrine in Marcel's thought is that the human subject is identified with his or her own body. "I am my body" is an assertion found in many of Marcel's works and in this statement Marcel wishes to bring out the unity and oneness of the human person who is both soul and body without reducing human nature to either pole.[8] As the body-subject, the body is not something independent of me, but is at the very core of who I am. I exist in the world as a corporeal being, not as an ephemeral spirit. By relying on an interpretation of the Latin prefix *ex-* which Marcel emphasizes has the connotation of "out", "outwards", and "out from", he asserts that to exist means to exhibit or manifest oneself to an outer reality and this can only be done in this world by corporeal beings.[9] The importance of incarnation cannot be overstated for Marcel's theory of the human person. To exist essentially means to be a body, a physical presence by which others can come to recognize me for who I am.

What the concept of the body-subject reveals is the unity which obtains between the soul and the body, or put differently, between the immaterial and material reaches of being. One of the most difficult problems of philosophy is the determination of the nature of the union which binds the soul and the body, two wholly distinct orders of being. What needs to be recognized in this regard is the place of the human subject in the confrontation with this reality. When I think about the nature of the union of the body and the soul, it is crucial that I be aware that I am not a neutral observer of this phenomenon, but am *intimately* involved in the dilemma which I am reflecting on.[10] We have already seen that I am capable of objectifying my body and cognizing it as something foreign to my very selfhood. But in this present scenario, if I am earnest in knowing the nature of the union of the body and the soul, I cannot adopt the same intellectual stance of objectification towards my body, for this perspective would be self-defeating. Indeed, it is clearly futile to attempt to know the union of the soul and the body by means of separating the soul from the body. Therefore when I reflect on the union of the body and the soul I need to be cognizant of the fact that I, as a self, reside in an essential unity with my body, that is, I am my body. This fusion between the two orders of being informs me that I am participating in the reality which I am seeking to investigate. It is impossible for me to separate myself from the issue at hand in order to be able to acquire epistemic knowledge about my very nature. If it is truly impossible to acquire this kind of objective knowledge here, then I am forced to concede that I will never *know* how my soul and body are united, that is, in an epistemic manner. It is precisely this insight which leads Marcel to describe the union of the soul and body as a mystery.[11]

As I have been presenting it here, the realm of mystery inheres principally in the identity of the soul and the body. This anthropological datum is the basis of all mystery. However, although I am my body, this does not mean that I am reduced to some physical thing wholly deprived of consciousness and freedom. What Marcel has in mind is that there is an interpenetration or cross-fertilization between the body and the soul, or expressed in somewhat Hegelian language, the body has become spiritual and the soul has become corporeal. Human intelligence continues to be exercised in the context of mystery, but naturally this type of intelligence is generically different from objective or scientific knowledge, what I have been calling epistemic knowledge. The key element in the form of intelligence associated with mystery is an act of unification. Specifically, the human ego needs to be unified with its body and its life. In his magnum opus *The Mystery of Being* Marcel calls this consolidating activity secondary reflection, which is a recuperative act of intelligence, as opposed to the analytic deployment of primary reflection.[12] In a later work, *The Existential Background of Human Dignity*, Marcel uses the Greek word *syneidesis* to denote this fundamental operation, which can be translated as a vision or insight which brings things together.[13] However, the most common description of this process which extends throughout Marcel's corpus belongs to the idea of recollection. Arguably one of the most challenging concepts to understand in Marcel's works, recollection can be described as a movement of recapturing the unified wholeness of one's being.[14] It is furthermore characterized as a return to the source of one's being, a kind of homecoming voyage. Marcel describes recollection in the following way:

> It should be noted that recollection…is very difficult to define….The word means what it says – the act whereby I re-collect myself as a unity; but this hold, this grasp upon myself, is also relaxation and abandon. *Abandon to…relaxation in the presence of…*.It is within recollection that I take up my position – or, rather, I become capable of taking up my position – in regard to my life; I withdraw from it in a certain way, but not as the pure subject of cognition; *in this withdrawal I carry with me that which I am and which perhaps my life is not*. This brings out the gap between my being and my life.[15]

Marcel's use of the term "recollection" should not be construed in terms of "remembering", strictly speaking, but rather has the connotation of "bringing together", or more literally, "collecting again" those things which originally belonged in a unity, but are no longer so. Recollection is a process by which I rediscover and am brought into contact once again with the source of my being. This source is a light which irradiates who I am with an intelligible illumination.

It is abundantly clear, I hope, that Marcel's notion of a mystery should not be understood as a dark, impenetrable and unknowable reality, something which is farthest removed from the realm of human intelligence. Rather, a mystery is thoroughly imbued with luminosity and insight because it is anchored in the light of existence. The concept of a light is extremely important for Marcel's doctrine of mystery and intersubjectivity. In many ways it is the heart of his entire philosophical project and his life as a philosopher.[16] Marcel does not use the term "light" in a metaphorical or poetic sense, but is pointing out a central feature of human existence and a type of intellectual insight which is different in kind from objective knowledge. This intelligible light, Marcel emphasizes, is what makes us truly human and in the absence of which we would lose our uniqueness as human beings. Indeed, human beings are this light. My understanding is illuminated by this light which enables me to have an insight into being, especially my own being. Because I participate in and am this light, the insight that I have of this light is part and parcel of my very selfhood. This is what is meant by recuperating the wholeness of my being when my selfhood and my life become one.

When my secondary reflection opens up the vista unto the domain of mystery and brings me into contact with the source of my being which is the light, I am not only being informed about who I am, but I am also being guided in my life in a certain direction. The light which illuminates my being enables me to see the path upon which I am travelling in life and in this sense the light points me in the direction of my vocation and destiny. This insight into my being is not something, it must be stressed, which happens of its own accord or much less is the product of some determinism. A mystery can only be recognized and acknowledged by a free and conscious being; it can never be imposed upon someone against his or her will. This dependence of the recognition of mystery on freedom tells us why it is possible for human beings to deny the existence of mystery. It goes without saying, however, that the fulfillment of my vocation or destiny can only happen with the active participation of my freedom. I must want to pursue my vocation and to choose to become who I am supposed to be – this is not something that anybody can do for me or on my behalf. The direction that my life assumes on its course of fulfillment is shown to me by the light of my being, the inner, silent beckoning of my conscience, what Marcel is wont to call the ontological exigence, the urging or demand of being. The more I am attentive to this light and the more I actively respond to the call of this light, the more I am led to recognize that my being is defined in and through the being of others. In other words, the insight that I obtain into my own being is that I am called to be in union with other human beings. In fact, Marcel underlines the parallel structure between the union of the body and the soul and the union between my being and the being of others in the domain of mystery. It is at this point in our discussion that we need to clarify how Marcel understands intersubjectivity as an inherent part of subjectivity itself and why he describes this as a mystery.

## THE MANIFESTATION OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

When I reflect on who I am and who I am called to be, I cannot ignore the reality of being. By the term "being" Marcel simply means the domain of value and significance, what has meaning for me. To put this idea into sharp focus, as the ancient Greeks taught, there is a world of difference between simply living and living well. To be fully human it is not enough merely to exist, such as by going through the mechanical motions of a normal life, but without any interior attachment to one's own life. Being fully alive in an existential sense is to experience the joy of life and the love of other human beings. My life must be perceived as having value in order for me to want to live and to enjoy my life. However, I cannot bestow value on my life singlehandedly and unilaterally deem my existence precious. Such a subjectivist approach to an appreciation of one's own existence fails to recognize the nature of values which is that they inhere in wider contexts or horizons of meaning. For example, when I listen to a song and describe it as beautiful or uplifting, it is not I who on my strength alone attach these values to the song in my judgement, but rather I am able to evaluate the song because I am empowered to do so by virtue of belonging to a background network of meaning which constitutes the necessary condition for every kind of value-positing. This horizon of interpretation of values is the recognition of meaning as such. In a meaningless universe, as experienced by someone who is in the darkest throes of despair, an individual is incapable of evaluating the song at all because without being rooted in a texture of meaning there is no value to be found in anything. What this cursory examination has exposed is the necessary condition for both the appreciation and ontology of value in human existence in what I have called the horizon or network of meaning. In very staunch terms Marcel indicates that being has its home in the domain of intersubjectivity, the union of persons. What justifies Marcel to draw this conclusion?

It is experience which teaches me that meaning is to be found in my relationships with others. In a friendship, for example, one that is authentic and pure, my friend and I are truly present to each other, so much so that my friend inheres in my soul and I conversely feel myself to be a part of my friend's being. The sceptic can of course dismiss such language as unnecessarily effusive and sentimental, but for those of us who have *experienced* true friendship there is no doubt of the adequacy of such a description. Intersubjective relationships are experienced as meaningful and essential to self-fulfillment and it is the persons who participate in such relationships who will come to recognize and acknowledge the meaning which such relationships have for them. Somebody who has never experienced a spiritual intimacy with another human being will certainly have a difficult time in agreeing with these statements, but it must be said that such a person would be a rarity indeed and if he or she did exist, could hardly be called "human" in the proper sense of the term. It is in and through my concrete life, as I live out my experiences as a corporeal being,

that I recognize the value of intersubjectivity and its meaning for my life and selfhood. It is important to see that the reality of intersubjectivity belongs to the sphere of mystery, which is entered into, participated in and acknowledged all on the basis of freedom. It is precisely the phenomenon of being involved and engaged in the relationship with the other which moves this reality into the domain of mystery. There are two manifestations of this mystery of intersubjectivity which preoccupied Marcel throughout his life and which illustrate this reality in a superlative fashion. These two paradigmatic contexts are the family and death, the former which focuses on the beginning of human life and latter which highlights the end. I would like to examine these two realities in order to shed more light on the principal topic of this essay.

A family is necessarily composed of at least two individuals, so its very essence is that of an intersubjective nexus. As with all genuinely intersubjective relationships, it is impossible to determine the nature of a family in positivist and empirical terms. A family is not merely an indeterminate collectivity of individuals nor is it a purely legally and socially constructed institution, ordained through some kind of contract. The more one reflects on what the *being* of a family is, the more one is impetuously driven to the insight that the family is a unique kind of human community which is predominantly responsible for the bearing and rearing of children. Although it is a pervasive reality of our world that many children are born outside of families and are even abandoned by their parents, such events should be interpreted as aberrations of the normal process by which human beings enter into and are sustained in this world. Under normal circumstances a human being is born into the world in and through a family. It is in the context of intersubjectivity that new life is created. Moreover, it is in the family that the event of incarnation takes place, that is, the coming-to-be of a bodily spirit who is a person. Marcel understands the family as a living presence through which the human species has become individualized in the singular creature of a human being.[17] The procreation of children, however, as important as this is, is not the defining feature of a family. What is paramount for a family to be authentic is that a deep spiritual union exists in the members of the family which is experienced as a presence. It is only from out of this union that procreation follows as a kind of natural emanation. But in the absence of the union procreation by itself will not salvage the family.

To be clear, what I am endeavouring to uncover is the very meaning or essence of a family. A purely empirical outlook will not be able to capture this proper essence. In other words, a family cannot be observed from the outside and analyzed empirically for its essential qualities. Why? Because the notion of a family cannot be separated from the notion of being and value; and because the notion of being can only be grasped from within an intersubjective domain, which means that only if I situate myself within my own family and approach the phenomenon of the family from the standpoint of my first-hand experiences in my own family can I arrive at a

genuinely true understanding of what a family is. To borrow an analogy, it is like trying to describe what beauty is to someone who has never experienced beauty. The individual who has no experience of beauty will not be able to understand what beauty is, no matter how it is described to him, because beauty is something that gains its proper meaning for human beings from the experience of beauty itself. In short, to understand the reality in question it is necessary to experience it first-hand and constantly to refer to this first-hand experience when contemplating the essence of such a reality. It is illusory to describe a family according to observational criteria, such as by citing legal policies or even by explicitly pointing to various real-world examples of cohabitation, because what is missing in this approach is the meaning which the family has for me. I cannot reflect on the meaning of the family independently of what my family means to me. And this meaning of the family for me ushers from the primordial spiritual union of persons which is present in the ontological constitution of the family.

There are two ways in which this spiritual union is to be understood. There is the union that ought to exist among the individual members: the father, mother, and existing children. But there is a more significant union which exists between each individual and life itself. The husband and the wife especially need to be in a union with life which is described as a pact that each makes with existence. What is unique about human beings is that we can actually adopt an attitude towards life itself, either affirming or denying it. The positive embrace of life leads in the direction of intersubjective existence, whereas the rejection of life results in despair and ultimately suicide. By remaining faithful to the exigencies of life the husband and wife manifest their pact in the birth of their children. This is Marcel's well known idea of creative fidelity, the generative process that naturally emerges from a condition of faithfulness to life. The family is therefore the revelation of this pact between the human being and life; it is, furthermore, the incarnation of this nuptial bond.

When I am born into a family, my being is nothing other than the affirmation of life. Marcel describes the child as a reply and judgement which the married couple make to each other and to life.[18] Deep within the child's soul is the call into being. The child is the incarnation of intersubjectivity because he or she embodies the spiritual union which inheres between his or her parents. At the earliest stage of our existence as human beings, right at the moment of our birth, we are indelibly stamped with presence of a *We*. Because the child incarnates the reply between the parents and between each of the parents and life, the child's very being is that of a vocation, a destiny to manifest this intersubjective reality inscribed into the child's essence. Therefore, throughout that child's life self-development assumes the character of the fulfillment of the inner essence of intersubjectivity which is supported by the hope, joy and love of life experienced in the family.

It is at this point that we can see more clearly the connection between the family and procreation. Not every marriage results in the

bearing of children and yet this matrimonial relationship can be considered a family if the requisite spiritual union exists between the spouses. However, the fact that the spouses in a childless marriage have come together in love to share their lives is something that has occurred as a consequence of their having been born into families at the very beginning of their existence. Every intersubjective relationship, such as in a marriage, is the explicit manifestation of the intersubjectivity inscribed into the very subjectivity of the person by virtue of his or her having been born into a family. Put concisely, it is the mystery of the family that accounts for the longing of individual human beings to form relationships with each other. So although not every marriage results in procreation, which suggests that procreation is not essential to the nature of a family, the *origin* of the family is due to the fact of procreation or natality, that is, the reality of having been born into a family.[19] In this sense, in addressing the origin of the family, procreation is central to its constitution and meaning.

If we turn now to the end of life we will see how death also exhibits the same intersubjective reality. It is easy to ponder the fact of death, the idea that all of us will one day die, in a rather abstract manner. To think about the concept of death as an abstract idea does not really capture the being or essence of death because all that we are able to form an idea about is the cessation of conscious life and the ultimate corruption of a human body. Such descriptions would be restricted to the observable qualities that impinge upon an organism which suffers what we call "death". What we fail to appreciate in such an objectifying attitude is the personal or spiritual element in death, namely, the passing away of a unique individual. To objectify the person in abstract reflection is to distort the very nature of the phenomenon of death because the concept of death is more than the mere termination of biological processes. However, if I instead turn my thoughts to my own death, as is the wont of many an anxious soul, I should recognize that I am equally capable of problematizing my own death by regarding it in a completely detached, disengaged manner. Because my death belongs to some future time and is not something that I concretely experience in the present, the only way that I can reflect on it is to approach it abstractly. Hence I endeavour to imagine a complete life from beginning to end in its totality which is only possible on the plane of abstraction, not on that of lived experience. Consequently, any reflection on my own death inevitably falsifies its proper essence because it is now detached from my being which is at home only in concrete, corporeal experience. Because I cannot *experience* my own death, something which has yet to occur, any reflection on my own death must be abstract and thus inauthentic.

The only legitimate and authentic reflection on death ushers from my reaction to the death of another human being. This is especially poignant in the case of the death of a loved one. When somebody close to me dies, I have an immediate and first-hand experience of this person passing away and thus do not need to abstract myself from this reality in order to formulate an idea of it. My experience of bereavement at this loss of life is

firmly ensconced in an intersubjective nexus, that is, my intimate relationship with this person. Even though the person has died, I continue to affirm his existence, to believe that he will not die, that he is immortal. This is not a volitionally posited belief, one that I idiosyncratically assert, but is a deep and mysterious affirmation of life which originates from my very being. In truth, I could not but affirm the deceased's continued existence in an afterlife because my own being is at stake in this attitude. To deny that the dead person lives on would be tantamount to violating the intersubjective foundation of my being, for the deceased continues to live in me, not in a hazy, emotional way, but in an existential manner insofar as I exist. It is clear that the belief in the immortality of the soul is legitimate only in the domain of mystery and the moment we attempt to problematize this reality is the moment we lose sight of its proper being. To repeat, I am not concerned primarily with my own immortality as I am with the continued existence of those who have died and whose personal being is still present in me. The mystery of intersubjectivity explains how such a belief has currency in the human world.

Marcel's reflections on the nature of death pay special attention to Heidegger's doctrine of the human being (*Dasein*) as essentially constituted by the inevitability of death. Although Marcel is full of praise for Heidegger's philosophy, he is perplexed by the precise meaning of Heidegger's phrase *Sein zum Tode*, normally translated into English as either "Being-Towards-Death" or "Being-Unto-Death".[20] Succinctly put, it is unclear to Marcel what exactly the preposition "to" (*zu*) means in this context. It cannot mean an intended goal or purpose, such as in the expression "to be *for* death" (*être pour la mort*), because the original German does not allow for such a translation; nor can it mean "to be *towards* death" (*être vers la mort*) because the word "towards" (*vers*) is a preposition which denotes motion and the verb "to be" (*être*) is not a verb of motion. The translation which Marcel prefers, which remains faithful to Heidegger's philosophical premises, yet which is not entirely literal, is "to be *condemned* to die".[21] By this Marcel wishes to express his conviction that each and every human being is ontologically wedded to death, in the sense that death is inescapable. But what makes this connection with death a condemnation is its tragic character. Heidegger placed much emphasis on the solitary experience of death - I suffer my own death all alone and nobody can know what it is like for me to die except me. Marcel objects to this solipsistic interpretation because it denies the impact that one's death has on others. The fact that my death does bring grief to those who are close to me reveals that my death is not mine alone, that it is suffered by others as well. Thus for Marcel the tragic nature of death is not contained so much in the prospect of my own end, but in the sadness and grief that we experience when our friends and relatives die. We are condemned to experience death in this life, as an immanent part of life itself, because those persons with whom we are ontologically bonded die. When we die, our death will be equally felt by those who cherish and love us.

## CONCLUSION

In an age when positivism and individualism are monopolizing the spheres of epistemology and anthropology respectively it would not come as a great surprise if many who are exposed to Marcel's ruminations on the mystery of intersubjectivity would find themselves inveterately resistant to accepting his conclusions. Marcel's fundamental goal in his philosophical life was to illuminate the true core of human existence which could only be entered into by eschewing the obsessive attachment to the scientific paradigm in knowledge and by opening oneself up interiorly to the meaning of being. Naturally, this reorientation in one's attitude towards oneself and towards life requires the generous acknowledgement of other valid forms of understanding than what is being slavishly promoted in our popular culture. The domain of mystery is a source of intellectual enlightenment which incorporates not only our minds, but most importantly our bodies into the quest for insight into the human condition. In this essay I hope to have shown that the body is the locus for the distinction between the two basic modes of human cognition – the problem and the mystery – and that the openness towards mystery, which can only happen through freedom, reveals the reality of intersubjectivity which is ontologically rooted in our personhood. Although our world proclaims the value of individualism as a sacred mantra, at the core of our being lies an ineradicable connection with other persons which calls forth to be recognized and acted upon. The family and the experience of the death of others are two pivotal phenomena which can be explained adequately only by reference to the mystery of intersubjectivity. Through love do we awaken this relation with others and invite them into the presence of our own being. To be human for Marcel means to come to know this mysterious reality of intersubjectivity in our lives, something which needs to be constantly nurtured and pursued. Our destiny as human beings depends on this insight. For intersubjectivity is nothing other than being together in light.

## NOTES

[1] The classical expression of this positivistic attitude is Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952).

[2] See Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, "The Myth of Atomism", *The Review of Metaphysics* 59 (2006): 841-868.

[3] For a discussion of atomism see Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 187-210.

[4] Libertarians, such as Robert Nozick and Jan Narveson, tend to hold an atomistic view of human nature.

[5] See Gabriel Marcel, *Men Against Humanity*, tr. G. S. Fraser (London: The Harvill Press, 1952), 114-121.

[6] See *The Decline of Wisdom* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), 7-10.

[7] *Creative Fidelity*, tr. Robert Rosthal (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1964), 20-26.

[8] See the following works: *The Mystery of Being. Volume 1: Reflection and Mystery*, tr. G. S. Fraser (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 50; *The Mystery of Being. Volume 2: Faith and Reality*, tr. G. S. Fraser (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 26; *Presence and Immortality*, tr. Michael A. Machado (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1967), 234; *Metaphysical Journal*, trans. Bernard Wall (London: Rockliff, 1952), 332-333.

[9] *The Mystery of Being. Volume 1: Reflection and Mystery*, 91.

[10] Marcel calls the body "the principle of intimacy" in *Creative Fidelity¸* 19.

[11] See *Presence and Immortality*, 234-235; *Metaphysical Journal*, 338: "What is commonly – but improperly – called the union of soul and body must be considered to be a metaphysical form of *hicceity*. Like hicceity this union is indivisible and reflection can obtain no hold upon it".

[12] *The Mystery of Being. Volume 1: Reflection and Mystery*, 77-102.

[13] *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), 75.

[14] *Being and Having*, tr. Katherine Farrer (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 113-114, 118.

[15] Gabriel Marcel, "On the Ontological Mystery", in *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Manya Harari (London: Harvill Press, 1954), 12-13.

[16] For references to the concept of light in Marcel's thought see the following works: *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, tr., Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 208-212; *Searchings* (New York: Newman Press, 1967), 20, 39; *Presence and Immortality*, 149, 239-242.

[17] "The Mystery of the Family", in *Homo Viator*, tr. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 71.

[18] "The Mystery of the Family", 70-71: "I *incarnate* the reply to the reciprocal appeal which two beings flung to each other in the unknown and which, without suspecting it, they flung beyond themselves to an incomprehensible power whose only expression is the bestowal of life. I *am* this reply, unformed at first, but who, as I become articulate, will know myself to be a reply and a judgment. Yes, I am irresistibly led to make the discovery that by being what I am, I myself am a judgment upon those who have called me into being; and thereby infinite new relationships will be established between them and me". See also 84-85.

[19] Those individuals who are not born into families would engender a defective potentiality to become fully human. One thinks in this regard of those individuals produced by means of reproductive technologies, such as

in vitro fertilization or even cloning, or abandoned at birth by their parents. Such individuals would embody a negative judgement in their very personhood, construed in terms of a refusal to embrace life and the other, and as a consequence the human aspiration towards realizing intersubjective relationships would be radically hampered.

[20] *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, 122-123; *Searchings*, 61.

[21] *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, 129.

# IS THE "INTELLIGIBILITY OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE" DEBATE DEAD?

*WILLIAM SWEET*

In the past half-century, a forceful criticism presented by some philosophers of religion has been that propositions expressing religious belief are meaningless or unintelligible. While some regard such criticism, and the debate that has ensued, as philosophically and theologically problematic and particularly as irrelevant to the lives of believers, one might still wonder about the status of this challenge today. To be sure, little consideration has been given to the underlying issue – namely, explaining exactly how statements of religious belief *are* intelligible, especially given that some of the putative objects of such beliefs are generally said by believers to be *not* comprehensible. At the very least, some may ask: If utterances of religious belief (and the corresponding religious discourses) *are* to be intelligible or meaningful, does this mean that they need to be commensurable with or explainable in terms of other (e.g., empirical, scientific) propositions?

Here, I wish to discuss these issues, specifically whether religious belief and related practices (particularly, religious discourse) are intelligible. Following a brief outline of what it is for something to be intelligible, I survey some of what I call the 'intelligibility of religious language' debate, i.e., some philosophical responses of the mid and late 20th century to the question whether propositions expressing religious belief can be said to be intelligible. I identify as well some cases where this philosophical discussion seems to have influenced, or at least has parallels with, theological discussion – cases which show that this debate is certainly not dead. Finally, I offer, from the position of a philosopher of religion, an outline of a response to some of the issues raised in this debate.

## I

Some recent discussion in the philosophy of religion concerning religious belief has involved the question of its intelligibility or meaningfulness. Certainly, the intelligibility of religious belief is an important matter, if one is ever to ascertain whether such beliefs are true or false.

What does 'intelligibility' mean? The notion is a broad one. In a technical sense, intelligibility can mean something like "capable of being apprehended by the intellect alone," as in Thomistic thought where it is said that "The first act of the intellect is to know, not its own action, not the ego, not phenomena, but objective and intelligible being."[1] This is not, however,

the sense that I have in mind here; I mean it in a sense that is closer to ordinary usage.

To say that something is intelligible includes the following:

1. Intelligibility is a characteristic of an object (e.g., a statement, a language, a being) in relation to a knowing subject. Something is intelligible if we understand it, we know what it means or refers to, or if it has some significance for a person. In this sense it is something subjective, that is, related to a *subject.*

2. To understand a statement or object, or know what it means, however, requires that it can also be placed within a larger theory – i.e., that it can be theoretically comprehended (and perhaps thereby explained or justified).

3. To say that something is intelligible means that people can act on it. If a statement, for example, is intelligible, we should be able to infer things from it and we should be able to intend something concerning the matter. Thus, a test of the intelligibility of a statement is to see whether we can *do* something with it (and, if so, what).

Intelligibility, then, involves practices, and these practices give us standards of what is right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, and so on, and this means that intelligibility is something that is not *purely* private or subjective.

4. To say that something is intelligible can *also* mean that it can be translated or explained or justified non-circularly *to others* – i.e., both to those who share one's discourse and practice, but also (at least, in principle) to others who do not. When we look at propositions expressing religious belief, for example, it is sometimes claimed that such propositions are commensurable with propositions in other discourses. The easier it is for others to understand them, the more intelligible they are said to be.

If something meets the first three descriptions above, then it is intelligible in what I would call a weak sense. If it also meets the fourth, then it is intelligible in what I would call a strong sense – and it is in this sense that I will primarily use it here.

Still, intelligibility is contextual: there is no such thing as something being intelligible as such, but it is intelligible to someone or in some situation (e.g., in relation to some conceptual scheme or some set of practices), though it needn't be intelligible to everyone in every situation. So the context in which a word or statement or action appears sets general standards for intelligibility or meaningfulness.

## II

It has been argued by some that (propositions expressing) religious beliefs are *not* intelligible – at least not in the strong sense. What arguments can be given for such a view?

## II. 1

One such argument comes from the perspective of the non-believer. Here, it has been argued that while some propositions expressing religious belief are unsubstantiated or question begging or demonstrably false, there are others that are altogether unintelligible. These beliefs are either void of content or internally inconsistent. This argument has been made by those who take a broadly logical empiricist approach to meaning, such as Anthony Flew and Kai Nielsen – and by some more recent authors, to whom I will refer in a moment.

In a famous essay from the early 1950s, "Theology and Falsification,"[2] Anthony Flew focuses on the intelligibility or meaningfulness of propositions expressing religious belief. Flew says that, to be meaningful or intelligible, a sentence (or hypothesis) must be testable – what he calls falsifiable – i.e., we have to know what would have to count against the sentence or hypothesis being true. (By 'counting against' Flew means simply empirical evidence or propositions that are known to be true, and that are inconsistent with the sentence or hypothesis in question.) If there is nothing (e.g., no observation or assertion) that could count against a particular statement, it is not testable or falsifiable, it is *void of content*, and therefore not meaningful. In other words, nothing at all is signified by that proposition and, while it may have some emotional significance, it has no cognitive meaning and is unintelligible.

Flew's position has been taken up by others, notably by Kai Nielsen. Nielsen bases part of his critique of religion and religious belief on what he calls "Flew's challenge" and on the principle that "an utterance is devoid of factual content... if it is not directly or indirectly confirmable or infirmable in principle."[3]

To begin with, Nielsen claims that some key propositions expressing religious belief are not falsifiable – i.e., those where the religious believer denies that there is any state of affairs that would count against their truth.[4] Nor, Nielsen charges, can one *verify* such beliefs either. According to Nielsen, for a term to have a meaning, it must have a referent that has "some empirical anchorage"[5] – that is, it must be, in principle, directly observable, experienced or encountered. Yet, he says, no term describing God has this characteristic. Therefore, 'God-talk' is unintelligible or meaningless.

To support this, Nielsen asks 'How do we learn to refer to God in the first place?' How did we learn to use the word 'God'? Obviously, no one pointed to it, and it does not even seem evident in the way in which something intangible, such as love, may be evident. Nielsen writes: "How do we... identify God, how do we individuate God, what are we talking about when we talk of God..."[6] Is 'God' a proper name? a description? a predicate? "What literally are we talking about when we speak of this being... what kind of reality...?"[7] Nielsen notes that "Granted 'God' does not stand for an object among objects, but still what does 'God' stand for?"[8]

Or again, look at religious beliefs about God. Nielsen considers the putative religious belief that "God is an infinite individual."[9] Nielsen claims that no sense can be "teased out"[10] of this expression, and he denies that terms such as "individual" and "infinite," even employed analogically, could be meaningfully attributed to God. He says, for example, that "if something is an individual and if that individual is also a person... [then] that person is only identifiable through having a body" or, at least, "must be a discrete and distinct reality" and "limited."[11] This, however, is clearly at odds with the concept of "infinity." He concludes, then, that the expression "'infinite individual' is ... nonsense."[12] Nielsen argues that a similar analysis and critique can be given of such notions of God as "cause" or as "transcendent" or as "necessary being", so that it becomes clear that the concept of God "is either cognitively meaningless, unintelligible, contradictory, incomprehensible or incoherent."[13]

Finally, even if we could understand what God is or what the subjects referred to in religious beliefs are about, how can we know, when we utter a religious belief, that what we are saying is *true*? Consider the belief that there will be a resurrection of the body, and an eternal life thereafter. Nielsen asks "How can a person be sure that he has it right when he talks about a resurrection world?" or "How can he be sure he has got it right when talking about the resurrection of the body?" Such a person is not asking whether Catholics or Presbyterians believe that there is a resurrection; rather, he is asking "What or who is right?" It is no help in ascertaining whether one's religious beliefs are true, Nielsen insists, by simply being told some of the other religious beliefs that that person may have.

Nielsen concludes that "we cannot understand what could possibly count as an exemplification"[14] of the term "God" or of the predicates attributed to God in religious beliefs, nor "what it would be like for either a believer or a non-believer to know or have reason to believe that such a reference has been successfully made."[15] Given the above, he asks: "How can we possibly be justified in saying that the concepts in question are unproblematic and are in order as they are?"[16] Moreover, because we cannot understand what is being referred to,[17] he argues that we can have no understanding of "God-talk"[18]; "we are not clear what we are talking about and we don't know how to settle the truth of such propositions."[19] Particular religious beliefs must be abandoned not because they are false, but because they cannot even possibly be true – i.e., because they are not intelligible.

(The concerns and criticisms of Flew and Nielsen continue to be posed. A number of contemporary critics of religion, the so-called "New Atheists" such as Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins, have also pursued this particular point of the unintelligibility of propositions expressing religious belief. In his *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Dennett writes that many religious beliefs are "Not just counterintuitive…but downright unintelligible" and reflect an "inflation into incomprehensibility."[20] Similarly, in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins refers to

religion as containing "unintelligible propositions," and he frequently describes religion as "nonsense."[21])

In short, on this view, if the terms employed in religious beliefs are meaningless or unclear, such beliefs, and arguably religion as a whole, should be abandoned.

## II. 2

A related argument has been made saying that religious belief *as a whole* is unintelligible – that, even if we allow that there is no intrinsic unintelligibility of the individual claims made by believers about their belief, the set of beliefs taken together, or the beliefs taken in conjunction with established ethical and scientific truths, are inconsistent or mutually exclusive. Thus, even if individual claims are meaningful, the general *position* is unintelligible.

This seems to be the view of many critics of religious belief, and is exemplified by some of the arguments made in a recent (2004) debate between a theist, William Lane Craig, and a skeptic, Walter Sinnott Armstrong.[22] In *God?: A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist*, a volume based on a series of exchanges between Craig and Sinnott Armstrong, Sinnott Armstrong begins by considering a number of arguments for the existence of God. As each argument is examined, Sinnott Armstrong claims that it does not prove what theists, such as Craig, generally hold – i.e., that there is an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good, eternal, and personal God. Nor do all the arguments combined together prove that such a being exists either. Then, following H.J. McCloskey, J.L. Mackie, and others, Sinnott Armstrong considers several arguments to think that God does not exist – for example, the problem of evil, and problems concerning God's transcendence and immanence. The conclusion that Sinnott-Armstrong draws from this is that the concept of God, as omnipotent, omniscient, and so on, is inconsistent with what we all know about the world. He concludes, then, that this shows that there are good reasons to hold that God does not exist or – more strongly – that such a God (as omnipotent, etc.) *makes no sense*, given what we know about the world. (Much the same claim is made, though with varying degrees of sophistication, by Dawkins and Dennett, but also by Sam Harris.[23]) Thus, these critics conclude, the theistic *position* as a whole is not consistent or intelligible, even in a weak sense.

## II. 3

There are, interestingly, arguments challenging the intelligibility of religious belief from the perspective of believers.

It is frequently noted that religious experience and the objects of religious belief are beyond rational comprehension, and so some conclude that the propositions expressing religious belief, and perhaps religious belief

itself, are beyond reason, and are strictly not intelligible, with the consequence that philosophy of religion (or philosophical theology) and theology itself have a very limited sphere indeed. At best, one can respond to critiques of religious belief, and show that they are insufficient or fail, but not provide positive arguments or proofs for it.

This kind of argument is adopted by those who take a broadly 'fideist' view – e.g., Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth – and it is reflected in the work, in the latter part of the last century, of Peter Winch and D.Z. Phillips.

According to Kierkegaard, for example, there is an "infinite qualitative difference" between God and humanity,[24] and an "absolute difference" between a human being and God.[25] Human language, therefore, can never succeed in transmitting any positive cognitive propositions – nor perhaps any propositions at all – concerning the divine. Karl Barth takes up this perspective in a number of works. In his Gifford lectures of 1938-39, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation*, for example, Barth writes that, in describing God as "eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, invisible," "by each and all of these words we mean that He is *above* us, *above* space and time, and *above* all concepts and opinions and all potentialities."[26] Human language must, therefore, simply *fail* in attempting to capture the nature of the divine. Barth warns his audience that "It is easy to misunderstand the [Scottish] Confession [of 1560], as if by enumerating a number of attributes such as the eternal, infinite, etc., which are assumed to be perfectly clear, it seeks to offer a universally intelligible philosophy of the Absolute, to which the doctrine of the Trinity is in some amazing way to be attached."[27] The Scottish Confession, Barth continues, in fact makes no such assumptions and does no such thing. Many have read Barth, then, as insisting that there can be no properly intelligible account of God. Indeed, for Barth as for Kierkegaard, neither philosophy nor a rationalist theology which attempts to understand the divine using human terms can provide an adequate exposition or defense of the divine. God is incompatible with the logic of any system. Any attempt to speak of the divine requires postulating it, and verbal or written accounts of the divine can be given only as witnesses of faith, not as providing any argument or evidence.

Such views have been taken up by a number of contemporary philosophers, particularly those influenced by some of the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein – and they are sometimes referred to as "Wittgensteinian fideists." According to one of the best known of them, the late D.Z. Phillips, for example, the way that people talk about the world and the way that believers talk about the divine have certain superficial similarities (e.g., in vocabulary), but at root there is a significant difference between them, and one is not reducible or translatable to the other. Phillips claims that, despite appearances, when people talk about God, particularly about God's existence and attributes, they are not talking about a "matter of fact" – i.e., simply about the existence and attributes of some particular

individual. Rather, what they are doing is a 'showing' – showing how they see or understand the world around them.[28]

The utterances of religious believers are not, then, empirical propositions. According to Phillips, their meaning and truth reflect a radically different way of seeing the world than we find in the utterances of non-believers; following Wittgenstein, they occur in different "language games", reflecting different "forms of life."[29] There is, then, no common or empirical standard for explaining or justifying belief. Nor is there any way of preferring one way of looking at the world, or one language game, over another, for the criteria we would use to compare these world views or language games will inevitably themselves be internal to just another way of looking at the world.

There are echoes of this view of the nature of religious language and of the intelligibility of religious belief, as far as I can tell, in the writings of some contemporary theologians who focus on the meaning of the term 'God,' or who discuss the possibility of interreligious dialogue. Let me briefly mention two examples.

The American theologian Gordon Kaufman notes, in his 1972 *God the Problem*, that "[t]he central problem of theological discourse, not shared with any other 'language games' is the meaning of the term 'God.' 'God' raises special problems of meaning because it is a noun which by definition refers to a reality transcendent of, and thus not locatable within, experience."[30] And so he asks: "But if absolutely nothing within our experience can be directly identified as that to which the term "God" properly refers, what meaning does or can the word have?"[31] Kaufman replies: "The real referent for 'God' is never accessible to us or in any way open to our observation or experience. It must remain always an unknown X, a mere limiting idea with no content."[32] All we have is an "available" referent, which is a human "imaginative construct." What, then, can we say truly, or even meaningfully, about this 'X'? Presumably nothing at all.

Kaufman continued to have hesitations about the intelligibility of the concept of God and related terms in later work, such as *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God*[33] (1981). Should one think that such a view has little purchase or weight today, it is interesting that in his 2000 *Warranted Christian Belief*, the Calvinist philosopher Alvin Plantinga spends a number of pages attacking Kaufman's view.[34]

A second example where one can find concerns raised about the meaningfulness and intelligibility of religious belief, is in the writings of the American theologian George Lindbeck. In *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (1984/2009)[35], but also in several articles in the 1990s, Lindbeck states that understanding across religious tradition and, by extension, interreligious dialogue are greatly hindered if not made impossible because of problematic issues concerning the meaning – or, to be more precise, of the translatability and commensurability – of religious language. Lindbeck, too, draws on Wittgenstein, adopting what he calls a "cultural-linguistic" approach, where he emphasizes that one cannot

understand the terms or utterances of another unless one shares, understands, or has access to the "language game" in which these terms and utterances appear. This means also understanding the sacred texts of that person's faith or tradition, and indeed the whole cultural context in which that text and that language are found. Arguably, one must go even further; "one must participate in that community" of belief. This is, however, a practical impossibility for many outside a religious tradition who seek such an understanding of it.

One consequence of this view, then, is that there is no neutral or shared way of understanding reality and, therefore, of understanding religions. Religions are, as Lindbeck says, "untranslatable"[36] or "incommensurable," such that "no equivalents can be found in one language or religion for the crucial terms of the other."[37]

This view also suggests that the various religious traditions are different – and, possibly, practically inaccessible – forms of life or discourses.

Further, there seems to be no practicable way for those on the 'outside' of a tradition – be they of other religious traditions or critics of religion – to understand that tradition. Lindbeck writes: "when affirmations or ideas from categorially different religious or philosophical frameworks are introduced into a given religious outlook, these are either simply babbling or else, like mathematical formulas employed in a poetic text, they have vastly different functions and meanings than they had in their original settings."[38]

On the preceding views, then, religious belief has, at best, a rather weak intelligibility. Religious beliefs take place and have meaning only within the discourse or conceptual schema of the believer, and this discourse is radically different from that of the non-believer and even of those of other beliefs. Religious beliefs express a commitment to a particular 'form of life', cannot be shown to be true or justified in terms outside of that 'form of life', and are, therefore, not intelligible in a strong sense.

(Such a 'weak intelligibility' account, I would note parenthetically, is consistent with a view that is increasingly popular nowadays, and that is that religious belief and science are compatible to the extent that they do not overlap – i.e., that, so long as what the paleontologist and historian of science Stephen Jay Gould has called their respective 'non-overlapping magisteria' (NOMA) are respected[39], science can tell us about the world, religion can tell us about what is of value in the world, and neither can contradict or confirm the other.)

Where does such an account of the intelligibility – or, rather, unintelligibility (in a strong sense) – of religious belief leave us? On Phillips' view, philosophy's job is *not* to say what is meaningful or intelligible,[40] or what is to count as a good reason or argument or a bad one; nor can philosophy provide a neutral ground from which to judge the 'superiority' of one view about religion over another.[41] The job of

philosophy is simply to try *to understand* the discourse of those who use it, not to demonstrate its alleged intelligibility or unintelligibility, rationality or irrationality.

## II. 4

On each of the preceding views, then, religious beliefs are not intelligible in the strong sense – and, on some views, not even in the weak sense. And clearly, if a claim or a position is not intelligible – if we do not understand what it means – then it cannot be known to be true or false; we cannot coherently act on it because we cannot say what is consistent with it or required by it; and we cannot (even in principle) provide an explanation or argument to show that others should, or could, believe it.

## III

This claim that religious beliefs, or that religious belief as a whole, are not intelligible in the strong sense has been challenged on a number of grounds – and the appeals to 'NOMA' or to some kind of fideism seem simply to avoid the issues. Nevertheless, as we see above, this claim has had a remarkable persistence and, as I have noted, it is present today in the philosophy of religion but also in theology. This is perhaps because it seems to give a plausible explanation of a number of features of religious belief.

The first is that discussions of, and arguments for and against, religious belief appear to have met with a lack of success. Moreover, when religious claims and empirical claims (at least, seem to) come into conflict, there are no obvious neutral criteria that allow us to resolve the disagreement. Further, when it comes to some central religious beliefs (e.g., in Christianity, the Trinity), there does seem to be a lack of commensurability or explanation in more basic terms, particularly to those outside of the tradition.

Yet many believers (and non-believers) do seem to understand, act on, dissent from, challenge, and so on, religious belief. Moreover, we see functioning practices (e.g., discourses) related to religious belief. Surely this would *prima facie* support a claim of there being some intelligibility.

In any event, it is clear, then, that even when it may not be explicitly framed as such, the 'intelligibility' debate is still with us.

So, is there any way in which we might make some progress on this question of intelligibility? Let me make a suggestion.

## IV

Defending the (strong) intelligibility of religious belief is clearly challenging, given the issues raised in the preceding section. Nevertheless, such a defence is possible. Many of these issues rest, I would argue, on a conception of the nature of religious belief that is in fact problematic.

Religious belief is more complex, and understanding religious beliefs even more complex, than many of the above views recognise.[42] Before we can make any claims about the intelligibility of religious belief, then, the key questions one should pursue are, *first*, what religious belief (and propositions expressing religious belief) are; and, *second*, whether they are distinct from other activities and discourses. If we can answer these questions in a way that reflects how believers understand religious belief, then we will see that religious beliefs *can be* intelligible in the strong sense, but also that utterances expressing religious belief are *not* the same as those expressing scientific claims, ethical views, aesthetic judgements, and the like.[43]

What, then, is religious belief? In general, we can understand this term in two senses.

The first sense is religious belief *as a whole*, or *as such*, and it is roughly equivalent to 'faith'. Faith is a practice (or, better, a set of practices), and while it contains a number of beliefs, it is not reducible to them.

The second sense is what we might call *particular* religious beliefs – i.e., those utterances which believers make in performing certain acts, or to express, 'bear witness to,' or describe something about or involved in their belief in the first sense. They are the utterances that arise, and have a role, in the practices that constitute religious belief 'as a whole,' though it does not follow that believers have thought about or articulated all of them.

What one will find in looking at such beliefs is that the meaning (and, thereby, the truth) of a particular religious belief can be grasped only if one recognizes it as having two dimensions: an empirical or descriptive one, and an expressive one.

Consider, for example, the following statement: 'Jesus was the son of Mary.' On the face of it, this may appear to be something mundane – that Jesus had a (human) mother and that her name was Mary. And one could imagine finding the census records of Bethlehem in 7 B.C.E. wherein we find mention of Mary and her son. But if a Christian says 'Jesus was the son of Mary,' that person does not utter a mere historical proposition. For such a believer to say this is also to assert one's belief that Jesus, the Christ, had a human nature. And this implies not only the incarnation, but is related to Jesus's 'mission' on earth, his role as 'mediator,' and so on. Moreover, the way in which believers hold such a belief tells us that, when they utter it, it has an important, if not fundamental, role in their lives. Thus, such an utterance both reflects a series of other beliefs, and is itself of great significance for the believer. For Christians, 'Jesus was the son of Mary' says not only something of who he was, but says something about why and how his existence is so important to them. There is, then, a descriptive claim being made, but there is also an expression of how one does or will act on that claim – and it is the presence of both the descriptive and the expressive elements that distinguishes a religious belief from a purely historical belief. Furthermore, what the utterance itself *means*, will be different (at least in

some degree) for different believers, and will be quite different for the believer and the non-believer. A non-believer who says that 'Jesus was the son of Mary,' therefore, is not uttering a religious belief; a believer who pronounces these words, is.[44]

This feature of religious belief – that it has both a descriptive and an expressive character – is central to what it is; failure to recognize this is part of the reason why it is sometimes a challenge to grasp the meaning of such beliefs, and therefore why some might consider such beliefs unintelligible. It is, in part, because religious belief has this distinctive character that it may not meet the criteria for meaning and truth that one finds in other (e.g., empirical scientific) discourses – i.e., that they are not wholly commensurable. Those who hold that religious beliefs are simply descriptive, empirical propositions (and therefore should be subject to the same criteria of meaning and truth, such as the verification and falsification principles) miss this point.

What makes a belief *distinctively* religious, then, is a consequence of this expressive dimension. It is not just that the belief refers, directly or indirectly, to certain persons or events. (For then beliefs like 'Jesus had ten toes' or 'Mary was not the mother of God' would be religious beliefs.) For a particular belief to be a religious belief, I would suggest, it must do at least three things: i) express one's faith or one's religious belief 'as a whole'; ii) indicate that one is disposed (or intends) to act on it *from* one's faith, and iii) refer to some persons or events that standardly have some relation to a reality which is beyond the empirical, observable, and material. In other words, what makes a religious belief religious is not just its subject matter (i.e., that it is a belief about certain particular beings or events), nor that it is held in a certain way (i.e., in a way that expresses a trust or commitment that shows that the beliefs are fundamental to and significant in one's life). It is the holding of a belief or a *set* of beliefs in this *latter* way that makes a belief religious.

How, then, can one determine whether an utterance of religious belief is intelligible or meaningful?

In the first place, like all beliefs and practices, religious beliefs and religious belief 'as a whole' must meet some general standards for intelligibility or cognitive meaningfulness. These criteria are:

1. they are not internally contradictory or inconsistent, and
2. they meet standards set by not just the (discursive) practices, but by the traditions and institutions, in which they appear.[45]

But while the meaning and truth of particular religious beliefs are *initially* determined within a religious discourse or tradition (i.e., as being compatible or consistent – or incompatible or inconsistent – with other beliefs in that discourse or tradition), there is another criterion:

3. they are consistent or coherent with meaningful beliefs (e.g., moral and empirical ones) in other discourses and practices – or can explain, in terms of those other discourses, why they are not.

I would add one additional criterion. Given that religious beliefs are occasioned by and are responses to the world, it must be the case that

4. they must fit, or be compatible with, the way things are in the world.[46] The reference of religious terms, and the meaning and truth of religious beliefs, are not, therefore, entirely internal to a religious discourse or system of religious belief.

Religious beliefs are, therefore, intelligible so far as they meet the above criteria. They can be placed within a larger theory – specifically, that expressed by the set of practices that are part of religious belief. Moreover, those participating in the discourse in which beliefs are expressed can draw inferences; not only can, but must, have the intention to act on it; and can and do act on it. Further, because religious belief is a response to persons or events in the world, it can be translated, explained, or even possibly justified to others. Since particular religious beliefs have a cognitive or descriptive element, there is at least some commensurability between religious beliefs and other beliefs, and even between one set of religious beliefs and another – and it is by appealing to the facts about the world present in the descriptive element that we may find room for mutual understanding and agreement with others who do not share these particular beliefs or that belief as a whole.

It is because this character of religious belief as descriptive and expressive has not often been fully grasped that, I would suggest, believers have encountered difficulty in explaining and communicating religious beliefs – and which has led to such beliefs being misunderstood. Once we appreciate this character, we can see better how to respond to the claim that religious beliefs are not intelligible. By focusing on the descriptive element, critics of a religion – or of religion as a whole – tend to adopt an uncritical literalism that believers themselves do not hold, and so may miss or misunderstand what it is the believer is saying.

Understanding this character of religious belief, however, does not mean that it will be easy to determine the precise meaning of a religious belief.

To begin with, consider the criterion, noted above, that, to be intelligible, religious beliefs must "meet standards set by not just the practices, but the traditions and institutions in which they appear." We have to recognise, then, that particular religious beliefs lead to, and depend on, other beliefs; they are part of a whole web of belief. Thus, one cannot say that an utterance is a religious belief unless one is able to see a relation to other utterances that go with (or are implied by) it, and can understand something of the interpretive framework from whence it comes and its expressive function in a person's life. Now, when philosophers of religion want to ask about the meaning of a religious belief (e.g., whether it makes sense, how it can be tested or proven, and so on), they ought to – and they must – recognise this complex character. Moreover, they must also not

forget that the meaning and truth of such belief is not solely determined from within the discourse, traditions, and correlative dogmas.

Another reason why determining the precise meaning of a religious belief is not an easy matter is because particular religious beliefs, like belief as a whole, are open ended – that is, their specific meaning is something that is not entirely fixed. More experience or new experiences will affect one's beliefs. To say that new experience *must* lead to change in one's beliefs is perhaps too strong, but it is reasonable to say that new experience generally does affect one's understanding of what one already believes. Indeed, as believers have more experience of the world around them, they may speak not only of having a more mature belief or faith, but of understanding more fully the particular claims they have always held. (Of course, sometimes one's religious beliefs really do change, and old beliefs may be explicitly rejected.) Often, people will continue to use the same words and may insist that their youthful beliefs were not so much wrong as, rather, immature, undeveloped or incomplete. And even when some particular beliefs seem clearly contradictory with their other and their later beliefs, they may say that they still have the same faith or belief as a whole. So what exactly the belief means, then, may be difficult to say; indeed, it may be easier to say what it does not mean.[47]

A further challenge to understanding the meaning of a religious belief is that the criteria for getting a belief right or wrong may be unclear even to the believer. The words and concepts of religious belief have entered discussion about religion at different times; there may be implications, associations, and contexts of these concepts of which one is not fully aware; the accumulation of these, over time, may lead to contrasts and inconsistencies. (This is similar to a point made by Alasdair MacIntyre concerning our moral vocabulary.[48])

These and other issues are among the challenges to understanding the precise meaning of a religious belief, but they do not undermine the claim that such beliefs have meaning and are intelligible.

## V.

While religious beliefs have a distinctive character that sets them apart from other beliefs, claims and hypotheses, such as those found in the empirical sciences, such beliefs and the beliefs, claims, and statements made in other fields do bear on one another. And, as they do bear on one another, a critic of the preceding account may insist that:

1. commensurability is a condition or a criterion for the intelligibility of religious belief, and

2. all beliefs are ultimately subject to the same criteria or standard of intelligibility.

To the first point, it is true that there is some commensurability of religious belief as a whole and other (systems of) belief. This is because religious beliefs are about the world, and therefore there is a common root

between religious and non-religious beliefs about certain persons, events, and so on. Moreover, this descriptive aspect can be, at least in principle, understood by believers and non-believers alike. Nevertheless, because the criteria for holding such propositions – and perhaps even for their truth, falsity, and justifiability – are determined by a series of other beliefs, the conditions under which one might doubt the truth of or give up a belief, may (and often does) vary. So this commensurability, such as it is, is not a straightforward one, and neither does it entail that, for there to be intelligibility, there must be a complete commensurability of particular beliefs.

In response to the second point, while there are general criteria or standards of intelligibility of a religious belief, the specific criteria can – and do – vary. For example, they vary according to other beliefs with which it is associated (i.e., with the web of belief). This does not mean, however, that the intelligibility of religious beliefs cannot be challenged. There can be inconsistent practices, and some beliefs may not be intelligible because it is unclear how they can fit with other beliefs. Besides, no system of belief is entirely coherent because, as the beliefs are more deeply understood, we come to see connections and inconsistencies with other beliefs, and because the system must continually respond to new experiences and new information, and attempt to accommodate them within it. Of course, this is just what we should expect with any system of belief that is open to experience or that is not complete.

## CONCLUSION

The question of the intelligibility of religious language is not dominant in Anglo-American philosophy of religion today. Indeed, perhaps it never was. But, as the preceding review of some recent discussion attests, the issue is far from dead; it continues to have a significant presence, particularly in a cultural environment where religion and religious belief are seen to be not merely personal but private and subjective. Moreover, the debate concerning the intelligibility of religious belief is not simply a philosophical one; it not only bears on theology, but has influenced theology.

In the preceding remarks, I have outlined some of the context of this debate and have noted some contributions and applications in recent discussion both in philosophy and in theology. I have also argued that there are also some resources, in the contemporary philosophy of religion, to advance this debate, and to provide an explanation of how religious language is intelligible. I have provided one attempt at such an explanation in the latter part of this paper.

This explanation requires, I have argued, looking more closely at both particular religious beliefs and at religious belief as a whole. In general, such an explanation involves being attentive to religious belief (and religious beliefs) as having both a descriptive and an expressive character. Still, while there are general criteria of intelligibility that apply to religious

belief, given the character of such belief, the importance of the openness of such belief to new experience, and the challenges of an inherited vocabulary that is not always consistent, one should not think that it will always be easy to determine exactly what such beliefs mean. These results should be of interest to philosophers and theologians alike.

Consequently, the accusation that propositions or 'systems' of religious belief are, in general, unintelligible seems, I have suggested, to be based on a failure to recognize the complexity of religious belief and of religious beliefs. This is something that many critics of religion, such as the so-called New Atheists, consistently fail to recognize. By addressing this issue of what religious belief is, in the way outlined above, the intelligibility of religious belief can arguably be defended, and defended in a way that is consistent with, and perhaps more congenial to, the lived experience of believers.[49]

## NOTES

[1] Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O. P., *Reality – A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought*, tr. P. Cummins (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1950).

[2] A. Flew. R.M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1955), 96-105.

[3] Kai Nielsen, *God, Scepticism and Modernity* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1989), p. 29. This volume reprints a number of papers on religion that Nielsen had published since the mid 1960s.

[4] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 160.

[5] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 75.

[6] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 114.

[7] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 114.

[8] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 114.

[9] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 21-23; 224-226.

[10] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 223.

[11] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 224.

[12] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 224.

[13] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 18.

[14] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 59.

[15] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 40.

[16] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 114.

[17] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 18; see 20.

[18] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 232.

[19] *God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 9.

[20] See *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), pp. 229-230.

[21] See *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 55. On the allegation of "nonsense," see also 119, 219, 318, 335. Sam Harris, in *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: WW

Norton & Company, 2004), argues that religious beliefs are "untestable propositions" (16, 26, see 66), "unfalsifiable" (66), and unconstrained by "internal coherence" (65).

[22] William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[23] See Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2004), where Harris writes that "We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common, we call them 'religious'; otherwise, they are likely to be called 'mad,' 'psychotic' or 'delusional'" (72). See also Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, referred to above.

[24] *The Sickness unto Death*, tr. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 126-7.

[25] "But the absolute paradox, precisely because it is absolute, can be related only to the absolute difference by which a human being differs from God." *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments I,* ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 217.

[26] *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), 25 and 28.

[27] *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, 32.

[28] "Philosophy, Theology, and the Reality of God." *Philosophical Quarterly*, 13 (1963): 344-350.

[29] See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P.M.S.Hacker and Joachim Schulte; tr. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S.Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed, rev. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), sects. 7; 65-67. See also sects. 19, 23. A number of relevant claims, focusing on religion, are made in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1972) and in his *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).

[30] *God the Problem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 7.

[31] *God the Problem,* 7.

[32] *God the Problem*, 85.

[33] *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981).

[34] See *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31-42. Plantinga objects (on p. 7) that, on this view, "The sentences Christians use to express (as they think) their beliefs, do not really express the kinds of propositions or thoughts Christians think they express. Indeed, perhaps, they don't express any propositions or thoughts at all but are a sort of disguised nonsense: they *look* as if they express propositions but in fact do not."

[35] *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1984). A new edition, with an afterword by Lindbeck, appeared in 2009 with Westminster John Knox Press.

[36] *The Nature of Doctrine*, 134.

[37] *The Nature of Doctrine*, 48.

[38] *The Nature of Doctrine*, 49.

[39] See Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999/2002).

[40] Phillips, "Philosophy, Theology, and the Reality of God," 347.

[41] Such a position would undoubtedly find favour among a number of 'post modern' philosophers, such as Richard Rorty, Hendrik Hart, and – it has been suggested to me – Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida. Derrida questions, for example, "the violent homogenization of languages through the neutrality of a translating medium that would claim to be transparent, metalinguistic, and universal." See Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: reflections on today's Europe*, tr. P-A Brault and M. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 58.

[42] In what follows, I draw extensively and directly on my recent book – co-authored with Hendrik Hart – *Responses to the Enlightenment. An Exchange on Foundations, Faith, and Community* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2012),

[43] This approach may be disputed by those who reject the claim that there can be a distinction – what some call a "demarcation" – between scientific and non-scientific propositions (e.g., Larry Laudan, "The Demise of the Demarcation Problem," in R.S. Cohen and L. Laudan (eds.), *Physics, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983), 111-127). I cannot enter into the discussion directly here, but as is clear in the preceding sections, a number of scholars would demur from such obituaries. See also, for example, S. Fuller "The Demarcation of Science: A Problem Whose Demise has Been Greatly Exaggerated," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 66 (1985), 329-341). Distinctions within and among scientific and metaphysical, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic, propositions, with corresponding distinctions about matters of method, have been defended since at least Aristotle (see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 1, Ch. 7, 1098a 27-9).

[44] Again, consider the statement 'Jesus is not the son of God,' uttered by a Muslim and by an atheist. It is clear that what they mean is not the same.

[45] For example, when the Christian says that 'the Bible' determines what is true or false, what she or he generally means is 'the Bible as interpreted and understood within the practices and discourse of the community of believers.'

[46] See my *Responses to the Enlightenment*, 89-90.

[47] Interestingly, this seems to be how some religious authorities respond to 'heterodox' views; they take care to say which interpretations are

wrong, but tend not to say what, specifically, is right. The encyclical of Pope John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, is an example of this. It describes a number of philosophical views that it takes to be inconsistent with an 'openness' to metaphysics, but it does not state which (if any) philosophical view would be the best one.

[48] See A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd. ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 226: "The interminable and unsettlable character of so much contemporary moral debate arises from the variety of heterogeneous and incommensurable concepts which inform the major premises from which the protagonists in such debates argue. In this conceptual *melange* there are to be found, jostling with such modern concepts as those of utility and rights, a variety of virtue concepts, functioning in a variety of different ways."

[49] A much earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2007 Canadian Jacques Maritain Association conference on "Whence Intelligibility? / De quoi parlons-nous lorsque nous parlons d'«intelligibilité» ?." The present version was presented as the Jay Newman Memorial Lecture in the Philosophy of Religion at the 2012 meeting of the Canadian Theological Society, and was published in the *Toronto Journal of Theology*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2012). I am grateful to the Editor and Publisher for permission to reprint it in this volume.

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# INDEX

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Today there is urgent need to attend to the nature and dignity of the person, to the quality of human life, to the purpose and goal of the physical transformation of our environment, and to the relation of all this to the development of social and political life. This, in turn, requires philosophic clarification of the base upon which freedom is exercised, that is, of the values which provide stability and guidance to one's decisions.

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