

The Loving Gaze: Philosophical Contemplation and the World as Gift

by

Julia Howard Klein

Department of Humanities
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

David Bell, Supervisor

Raymond Barfield

Paul Griffiths

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of
Humanities in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2011

ABSTRACT

The Loving Gaze: Philosophical Contemplation and the World as Gift

by

Julia Howard Klein

Department of Humanities
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

David Bell, Supervisor

Raymond Barfield

Paul Griffiths

An abstract of a thesis submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in the Department of
Humanities in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2011

Copyright by
Julia Klein
2011

Abstract

By looking at different conceptions of what it means to be human, this essay explores the question of the convergence of philosophical contemplation and the loving contemplation of God. Since the birth of philosophy as the love of wisdom, the simultaneous incommensurability and inseparability of philosophy as theory and philosophy as practice have become more and more problematic over the years; the insurmountable nature of this problem seems to have dissolved, in our present day and age, into a decidedly theoretical conception of philosophy—so much so, in fact, that the original aim of philosophy to affect our daily lives seems to have vanished altogether from the broad scope of contemporary academia, and indeed, from modern-day life as a whole. The present-day fixation upon absolute objective reality has grown into the dangerously superficial understanding of what it means to be human as ultimately reducible to rational explanation, and this is evident everywhere from the university classroom to the ostensible worthlessness of contemplative life. In forcing oneself to be reawakened to the original wonder that was the occasion for the inception of philosophy, one may discover that the wonder itself is not only concerned with rational explanation, but is rather the occasion that we have, even in the simplest and most basic of our everyday activities, to discover that what binds us all together as finite beings in a finite world is mystery, gratitude, and love. With respect to human nature, knowledge, the creative and poetic imagination, and our confrontations with death and suffering, it is only within the philosophical act, whereby we acknowledge the limits of our finitude and the boundlessness of our love, that we may ever hope to discover that which enables not just a theory well-formed, but a life well lived.

Dedication

For Benson Reid Wilcox, 1932—2010, a living occasion for my gratitude and love.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
1. Introduction.....	1
2. On Nature and Knowing	17
3. On Poetry and the Creative Imagination.....	26
4. On Death and Suffering	40
5. On the Loving Gaze.....	53
Works Cited	70

1. Introduction

As in all things great, philosophy's greatness resides in what it does—nothing. Truly *nothing* gets done with philosophy, if 'getting things done' entails that some tangible production, capable of utility's measurement, is yielded. Nothing is moved by philosophy, though many have been compelled and moved by the wonder of its activity. As offensively such hyperbolic claims may seem to rub up against our practical sensibilities, philosophy's claim to greatness is no more offensive than the claim to greatness in landing on the moon. This, too, achieved nothing apart from the act in itself—even if only for a moment. Attempting to draw up a quantitative measure of the utility of humanity's footprint on the moon turns up something akin to the great nil of philosophy; as an end in itself, landing on the moon returns us to its origin—the origin of *wonder*. Monumental greatness is heaped upon that historical event, in spite of the fact that, as of yet, the act in itself produced nothing of concrete value in the measurable marketplace—human wonder stretches up and out towards the moon only to achieve the miraculous strangeness we feel in the very idea of standing on it, wherein even having accomplished our mad goal, our ignorance of the universe and the wonder it inspires in us only increases exponentially. Of course, this does much to answer the question of why we never returned to the moon, as wonder's movement of desire to explore space is quickly occupied by profit. And yet, landing on the moon will always be symbolic of humanity's greatest capacities for transcending itself in the unknown;

one of humanities' greatest applications of technology ironically produces an end in the act itself. The greatness of philosophy and landing on the moon is realized in the reaching of an end no different than the birthplace of the movement toward it—the movement of wonder.

Aside from offering the common undergraduate philosophy-major a suitable or at least superficially impressive response to the incommensurable and unrelenting interrogations of what he or she will *do* with a degree in philosophy, the above comparison also offers a fresh look at the opening lines of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, that is, that 'all human beings by nature stretch themselves out toward knowing.'¹ If philosophy's greatness truly resides in its lack of tangible achievement, the apparent abstract loftiness of Aristotle's remark about the activity of philosophy may seem to endow it with the unflattering feature of being forbidden to those of us who are up to our elbows in the toil of practical necessity and quantifiable utility, which never relent in exhausting all of the resources, time and energy we are afforded in our everyday lives. Philosophical activity as an end in itself has come to signify a luxury which no one can afford these days, or a luxury which, even given excessive wealth and idleness, is only appropriate for fools, madmen, or snobbish cosmopolitans. After all, you might ask, who has the time and energy to engage in an act of questioning that has no apparent value apart from the questioning itself? Philosophy has become so worthless, so

¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1.

arrogant, so *against our nature*, from the ordinary perspective of our everyday, pedestrian lives. Must philosophy only have value from the disembodied bird's eye view that condescends to look down upon our street level confinement?

Against the charge of elitism, we must let Aristotle defend himself, in reminding us of the delight we take in our senses *for their own sake*; in particular, the sense of sight. Our sense of sight is such an enormous part of our active lives that we easily take it for granted until it is lost briefly enough to stub a toe in the dark on the way to the bathroom. But when it is allowed to break out in strangeness, openness and wonder in the face of the reality of the world we live in—this is the beginning of *the philosophical act*. The spirit of wonder is present even in the simplest and most basic of our activities as human beings—it arises at the sound of the river, the taste of wine, the smell of spring, the feel of the wind, at the sight of a mountain. So profoundly basic is our sensible experience of the world that we easily confine the presence of wonder to the *things* we experience *through* them, rather than the sensible experience itself. We forget that wonder is not just *what* things are, not just *how* or *why* things are, but most importantly, simply *that* things are—*that they exist at all*.

We also find the *Metaphysics* the idea of a ladder, by which we climb ascending rungs towards perfect contemplation of the divine intellect; after investigating sense perception, imagination, memory, and experiential 'know-how,' we discover that the one thing that binds them all together is the desire to know the causes of things—the

need to ask 'why.' We find the question 'why' met with a variety of possible answers that vary in degree of their comprehensiveness and all-inclusiveness. Ascending the ladder towards perfect contemplation of the divine intellect, the more that we approach it, the more comprehensive both question and answer become until we finally meet with fundamental formulation, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' As we confront this question, we find that the delight in our senses can be understood as a kernel of the desire to seek out the highest cause—the divine cause. It is in this that philosophy finds its highest task. For Aristotle, philosophy's highest task, and the highest task of humanity, culminates in a kind of natural theology, leaving all other forms of knowing as mere kernels of our most profound desire to know the divine intellect. Those of us who are forcibly entrenched within the bustle of life's market place are often left to regard these kernels with bitterness and indignation, the more they seem to be nothing but cruel reminders that the fruit from which they finally come is simply not ours to be tasted. Contemplation of the divine appears to exclude those who lack leisure, money, and time—those who are not properly entitled to the vocation of 'professional philosopher.'

Need the activity of philosophy be capable of genuine expression only through the vocation of 'professional philosopher'? After all, this conception of philosophy finds itself right at home in our picture of the philosopher as the professor at a large research-university, where his or her philosophical activity seems to be confined mostly to

lecturing, researching, writing and publishing highly specialized books, most of which are measured in worth not according to their universality or accessibility, but rather according to how far they are able to confound the non-specialist, the layman, the increasingly rare bird called the *seeker*, and lastly, quite generally, the reader as *human being*. Is this picture really anything more than an indication of how contemporary 'philosophy' has misappropriated Aristotle's conception of hierarchical knowledge?

But here lies the point: All of these 'professional philosophers,' who generally seem to find themselves in the service of an insistently *scientific* attitude, concern themselves with the idea that the real definition of philosophy is *not* the pursuit of truth, nor the love of wisdom, but merely the activity of supplying explanations that satisfy our obsessive fixation on absolute objective reality. Such explanations are in very high demand these days, and seem to have assumed the guise of covering the entire scope of what it means to be human. Of course, the human race has achieved incredible marvels, terrific practical advancements, by means of such an attitude, and which often do not settle things even on the surface but only open the door for further possibilities, further pursuits. But instead of recognizing this quality our horizon has, of always expanding away from us at the very moment we think to have somehow approached it—instead of seeing this for the marvel that it is in itself—the significance of the ever-expanding horizon is forgotten, and the great mystery of the universe becomes in our eyes nothing more than a nuisance, a problem to be solved. It is not that science in itself presents a

danger to our humanity, but rather, it is the attitude of loathing the mystery, the idea that the science of explanation is all there is to it—this is what haunts us and threatens to strip of us of the wonder with which we began, and towards which we must always strive—the wonder *that* things are, which is precisely the wonder that seeks no explanation, the wonder whose lack of understanding does not present a problem, but in itself is beautiful and something for which to be thankful. Broadly speaking, we seem to have lost sight of the fact that it is not what is understandable that helps us with what we do not understand, but, on the contrary, that it is precisely by the help of what we *do not understand* that we are ever able to understand anything at all.

For my purpose here, Aristotle's hierarchical knowledge about the causes of things may be more like a description of the content of philosophy, rather than a description of the nature of the philosophical act in itself. It is necessary that we ask why, how, what, in light of the wonder *that*—it is essential to our humanity and inevitable by virtue of our finitude and imperfection, not to mention our everyday practical necessities—and yet somehow we do all this, *not* in order to resolve our causal questions with ultimately satisfying causal explanations, but, rather surprisingly, only in order to help ourselves to finally, at least occasionally, *let go* of the very need for such explanations. Again we must take stock of the wonder *that* things are—we must actively try to place ourselves within an attitude of silence and openness with respect even to our most basic experiences of the world—including, of course, our sensible experiences of sight,

hearing, taste, etc. Present in this way, the spirit of wonder *that* things are, the wonder by which our horizon of vision opens up to perceiving the world as *gift*, may be seen as the moving and final cause of philosophy—but it does not seem to belong to philosophy as such. It is universally open to everyone wherever we find ourselves. And yet we are still left wondering whether philosophy's penultimate question, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' (as well as any answer it may turn up) is not the patent property of professionals—but, neither, more importantly, is the sheer wonder that moves such a question, the wonder, which, in philosophy, may be said to fade away, unless we find it again. We turn to Aristotle only to find that philosophical contemplation of the divine necessarily comes after rational and discursive thought, but itself is neither rational nor discursive; it is restless, fleeting, transitory, unstable, if only due to the fact that its quality of pure intuition and openness to the totality of things is incongruent with our imperfection, shown in our fixation upon the supremacy of rational explanation. The philosophical activity of seeking higher and higher causal explanations is always limited by that which it is *not* able to do. When we view the phenomenon in this way, it is nothing short of a miracle that *anyone* could ever ascend all the way up the ladder to achieve perfect contemplation, not to mention 'the few.' But if this strikes us as a dismal prospect, we must remember that there is another kind of contemplation, which is universally accessible, and which is marked by happiness, love, and a kind of peace—the loving contemplation of God.

Where does the contemplation of God begin? And how is it distinguished from the occupation of discovering why and what and how things are? Answering this question demands that we make a distinction between philosophy as an activity that seeks to unearth the origins of *why* and *what* life is, and philosophy as active wonder, as the loving pursuit of wisdom in light of the world perceived as gift, as the activity inseparable from the contemplation of God—*that the world is* at all reveals itself to us as a gift. Are these two activities distinguishable from one another? Are they inseparable? Are they incommensurable? Are they both inseparable and incommensurable? If we treat these questions as problems we can resolve, we already miss the mark of the wild and beautiful character of the philosophical act, which is an unremitting resistance to answers that unanimously remove the very presence of the questions. Such questions are living questions, and thus they must be inhabited, rather than eliminated. Inhabiting these questions demands that we resist the temptation of confusing what we find in our pursuit for any kind of absolute answer. My investigation is an attempt to live within these questions, and my response, far from absolute, begins and ends with a recognition of my limits—not my limitations, by which I am kept from moving beyond to something it is not within my power to achieve, but my limits, toward which I strive, more clearly perceived as a gift. What then is the nature of the philosophical act?

Recalling Aristotle's claim that 'all human beings by nature stretch themselves out toward knowing,' the question arises what he means 'by nature.' Now the word

'nature' (phusis) for Aristotle refers to the internal activity that makes anything *what it is*. The ideas of birth and growth, apparent in the Latin origins of our use of the word, are also close to the surface of the Greek word. Nature is evident primarily in living things, but it is also present in non-living things as well, since everything participates in the single organized whole of the cosmos.² Aristotle's claim is not that the desire for knowledge is perfectly natural, but it is rather that human beings, *as human beings*, all have this inclination towards knowing, by virtue of our being human. Here we may encounter some difficulty; if it is, in this sense, in our nature as human beings to seek knowledge, must we not admit that we don't have any choice in the matter? And if so, how can we reconcile the activity of *seeking*, of stretching ourselves out, with the idea that we are constrained by nature to do so? In other words, is it not a contradiction to say that we are seeking knowledge both as an act of nature, and as an act of the mind? This difficulty remains only so long as we are determined to regard 'mind' and 'nature' as two distinct and conflicting things. But there is a sense in which we may see 'mind' and 'nature' as one, insofar as the human soul is *created*. Part of this conception, then, is that the created being receives its essence, what makes it what it *is*, by an act on the part of some source that is external to itself; but just as it receives its essence by means of an act from without, it also *exists* as itself by means of an act internal to itself. In other words, what defines our natures from without is what defines our natures from within;

² Ibid, 149.

at the risk of sounding repetitive, it is not against our nature to seek knowledge with our minds, because it is in our very nature to do so.

The peculiar quality of that phrase 'by nature,' wherein we find that what is passive in us is also active in us, and that what is given to us from without is also alive within us, is equally present in the idea of 'stretching ourselves out toward knowing.' At first glance, we can see that our human inclination to seek knowledge is directed toward something that is outside of ourselves; in striving to know, we must extend beyond ourselves, we must reach out away from ourselves. Knowledge is thus something towards which we must strive as if from a distance, and the seeking of knowledge is thus an activity whereby we try to shorten the distance that separates us from attaining our ultimate goal. By nature we seek knowledge, therefore by nature we do not have knowledge. Knowledge lies outside of us, and we stretch ourselves out towards it in the genuine hope of attaining it, but it always lies beyond our reach, because the further we are able to reach, the further our goal appears to vanish into the distance. However, not all kinds of knowing must be defined by what they are unable to attain; the image of 'stretching oneself out' does not in itself have to compel us to emphasize the importance of that which is always well outside of our reach, as of our human *limitations*; the alternative position is that we focus on the force of the activity of stretching ourselves out, as of reaching the very *limits* of our human capabilities. As soon as we take up this attitude, the fact that we may well never *reach* the limits of human finitude ceases to

appear as a problem or impediment; far from being prevented or hindered in the activity whereby we realize our nature as humans, this realization takes on the optimistic quality as a task for a lifetime, and one that we can have concrete hope of actively fulfilling.

The kind of knowing that we find in the *Metaphysics* offers an excellent reference for the seeking quality that is intrinsic to human beings; but with respect to philosophical contemplation as the highest form of knowledge, we may find that it is not, after all, the last word. What makes Aristotle's *Metaphysics* such a momentous event in the history of Greek philosophy is that it is the first real instance in which the principle of first philosophy, the study of the immovable being, or of the sources and causes of all being, is attached to the notion of the divine. However, the nature of this conjunction is such that, although it achieves an unquestionably *rational* sort of theology, it deprives itself of the possibility for religious contemplation. The ultimate effort of the *Metaphysics* is to conceive of an act by means of another act; in other words, it is to conceive of the supreme act of all being, by means of the human act of contemplating the divine. But this supreme act of all being, the essence and existence of which is nothing but *to be*, by nature lies outside of the human understanding. Where the *Metaphysics* ends, faith begins; once we ascend the ladder which leads us to the point at which we can contemplate the essence of the divine, we are still falling short of the activity of contemplating not simply *what* something is or *why* something is, but *that* it is.

My aim, however, is not to show that the philosophical act, as understood through the *Metaphysics*, necessarily falls short of its own task; on the contrary, it is my desire to find a way to reconcile the Aristotelian conception of the philosophical pursuit with my present conception of the loving contemplation of God. The Greek word *theoria* is certainly distinct from the Latin word *contemplatio*, although both are usually translated as ‘contemplation.’ Aristotle’s use of the word has the significance of *seeing*, beholding, or looking at something in itself; it is conceived as a kind of contemplative knowledge aimed towards the truth, as opposed to practical knowledge that is aimed towards action. Thus we can safely say that, for Aristotle, the contemplation of being is properly called ‘theoretical’ when it aims to discover the truth, and nothing else whatsoever. This kind of philosophical *theoria* is in many ways indistinguishable from the Latin *contemplatio* as later conceived by the Christian West—in particular within the works of Aquinas—insofar as it refers to the contemplation of being that is guided solely by truth and nothing else. However, the Latin conception of *contemplatio* differs from the Greek conception of *theoria*, not only in that it is available not just for philosophers but for everyone, but also insofar as it refers not to the kind of seeing that comes after rational or discursive thought, but rather to the kind of seeing that is found in the activity of loving meditation or *prayer*.

Both the Greek *theoria* and the Latin *contemplatio* constitute a form of knowing that serves as the highest expression of human life; and we constantly find that Aquinas uses

the language of Aristotle to say specifically Christian things. But what we may discover is that, within the simultaneous convergence and divergence of these two forms of contemplation, the relation between philosophy and faith finds an illuminating expression. Although they are in many ways incommensurable, we find that they are also at once utterly inseparable. Many of us, absorbed in pondering the fundamental questions of existence, may realize that metaphysics and religion must meet somewhere, as if at a vanishing point in the infinitely distant future; and for some of us, there is always the temptation to separate philosophy from faith, to renounce one for the other, decisively, once and for all. But this is not at all necessary—indeed, it may even be impossible. Although the philosophical path towards contemplation of the divine is not the only means, or perhaps even the best means, by which we may seek god, it is still, as an active expression of what it means to be human, a definite kind of means, and one that may be particularly helpful or illuminating in the activity of our everyday lives.

With this in mind, my references to Aristotle, Aquinas, Plato, Kierkegaard, or anyone else for that matter, should not in themselves suggest that my thoughts are utterly concordant with theirs, or that what they yield must be taken for absolute and incontrovertible truth. I am not primarily concerned here with what others have thought, no matter how formidable they stand as figureheads of philosophy or theology, no matter how useful they have been and continue to be in the development and play of my own evolving ideas. I cannot take their word for absolute truth; all I can hope for is

to apprehend and create something of my own, which bears relevance and meaning in my life. I do not here concern myself with Aristotle as an historical figure, but with what he aims to say and the kind of response that it evokes in me; nor can I take Aquinas' word on faith, as it were, even though it proceeds from the standpoint of divine revelation, and assumes acceptance of the absolute authority of the Word of God. Instead it is my aim to illustrate some of the ways in which I can detect a convergence between philosophy and my faith, and which begins in the world *as gift*; Aristotle and Aquinas, and others as well, can be seen as a valuable instance of the point at which philosophical contemplation meets the contemplation of God, where philosophy as the love of knowledge is transformed into the loving pursuit of wisdom. The convergence of the two representative forms of contemplation—philosophical contemplation and the contemplation of God—is not merely an actual, historical convergence that we can investigate as a kind of factual yet idiosyncratic event of the distant past. On the contrary, it is a real, *living* convergence—which, even if it cannot be seamlessly transposed upon the consciousness of every individual, still refers to a timeless, living convergence which we all face as human beings, whether we come down on the side of atheism, agnosticism, or unshakeable faith in God.

It is from this vantage point that I try to inhabit my question, rather than by posing it in such a way that it stands as a distinct problem with a distinct solution. Far from finding myself within a *neutral* attitude, I have still encountered no little difficulty

facing the choice to write as either philosophy-student or seeker-of-God—and in the end, I have chosen to write from both. My aim is not to *persuade* in the sense of providing any kind of exhaustive answer or unqualified finality, but rather to *convince* of the passionate reality, the concrete presence, and the living affirmation of my questions. I do not wish to pretend that what I develop bears the burden of absolute truth or any claim on originality, but rather that it is motivated by the living exploration of human possibility and imaginative creativity, in light of the world as created by God, a world in which God *is* love. Like G.K. Chesterton’s Englishman who sets out to discover what he thinks to be an uncharted island in the new South Seas, and only succeeds in ‘discovering’ England,³ I have done nothing here but invent, largely by my own means, a far inferior version of what has already been accessible to everyone for thousands upon thousands of years. Like Chesterton, I declared myself an atheist by the age of twelve, an agnostic by the age of eighteen, and having thought myself repudiating the authority of an external coercion, I now suddenly and miraculously find myself swimming around quite gaily in the vast ocean of an ancient tradition. What I realize now, to my great surprise, is that even at the very moment I considered myself to be acting in the name of rebellion, I was obedient in my absolute indebtedness to the world in which I live. Thus it is that now, above all, my aim is never to lose sight of the spirit of wonder with which my questions were born, and the spirit of love with which they

³ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 2.

are and must be carried out—that is, the wonder I feel in the face of the great mystery, the wonder *that* things are. In striving to learn to live a life that is at once contemplative and active, I have found that philosophy, poetry and the creative imagination offer themselves up to me as vehicles for my desire to communicate the love I feel for the world in which I live, my love for the fragility and finitude of those who inhabit it with me, and who live against the backdrop of suffering and death—in a word, my love for the world as *gift*.

2. On Nature and Knowing

Once again, we begin by looking to the opening line of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* as an opportunity to investigate what it means to be 'by nature' and what it means to 'know,' and how these two are connected.

All human beings by nature stretch themselves out toward knowing.

The idea that we are anything by nature is to say that what makes us what we are as human beings is imposed on us by a force that is external to ourselves; however, the sense of the word 'impose' suggests that we are somehow limited or impeded by this external force. On the contrary, we are not passive receivers of what is given to us—we are active participants in living it out and realizing it—in making it 'more real.' In other words, 'If sight were given to a blind man, he would nevertheless see with his own sense of sight.'¹ The most concrete reality, the fullest realization of possibility, is found not merely in the essence or the substance of things, but also in the active existence of being in the world. It is by means of a distinct *act* that we are human beings rather than hummingbirds, real rather than not real; and this act does not keep us prisoners, but on the contrary, sets us free—free to realize our natures as human beings by actively *being* in the world, and by creatively realizing what it means to be human.

¹ Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, 53.

This ordinary word we use, 'nature,' visibly carries the sense both of birth and of growth—and this point is crucial. What makes us human beings is given to us at birth; and yet, at the same time, it just *is* our nature as human beings to catch up to ourselves, to grow into ourselves, in such a way that we must actively realize what we are 'by nature' in the world. When we talk about 'our nature,' we are talking about our deepest desires, what we inherently *seek*. As such, nature is not realized by a static principle that governs our every move; on the contrary, it is realized in a movement, a dynamic *stretching out*, wherein we actively and continually transcend ourselves in the growing realization of what it means to be human. Far from constraining us against our will, nature liberates us to realize our greatest possibilities. And just as we receive our nature from without, and yet actively realize it from within, so we stretch ourselves out toward some object of knowledge that is external to us, but in which we also are said to have *a share* of some kind.

Josef Pieper characterizes the natural desire for happiness as a kind of *thirst*; but he is careful to make a distinction between the activity of drinking, and the drink itself.² What it means for us to 'stretch ourselves out' by nature is not just likened to the state of being thirsty, nor is it likened merely to the state of *having had* one's thirst quenched; it seems instead that the analogy is best expressed in the *activity* of quenching one's thirst—in the dynamic act of *drinking*. Now, what is desirable is able to move the

² Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, 33.

appetite only insofar as it is apprehended; by the same token then, it appears that our desire does not decrease in proportion to what it apprehends, but on the contrary, becomes greater and stronger in proportion to its own satisfaction. In the act of drinking, our movement consumes both what we have apprehended, and what we have not yet apprehended—we are active participants in the movement by which the object of our desire is both present and absent to us in a unique way. As thirsty people craving drink, it is in the dynamic act of *drinking* that we are the most active and the most receptive that we can possibly be with respect to the object of our desire. This is why it is true that ‘in philosophy, the winner is the one who can run most slowly. Or: the one who gets there last.’³ In a word, the more one actively engages in the tension between not having and having, the more intense becomes the task of seeking knowledge.

What it means, then, to stretch ourselves out by nature is inseparable from the knowledge that we seek. It is because we have higher cognitive powers, higher powers of knowing, that we are able to desire what we apprehend, and not just that towards which we are naturally inclined because of our natural form. To put it another way, it is by virtue of having cognition that we are determined to our natural being through a natural form, and yet in such a way that we are receptive to other things—our sensory power receives the species of all sensible things and our intellect receives all intelligible things. Just as our will adheres to its final end, which is already given by nature, and yet

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 34.

is free to choose the means of fulfilling this end, so the intellect adheres by necessity to its first principles; in the things that have cognition, desire is found in a higher mode than the common natural mode of desire—in the things that have cognition, there is an inclination that goes beyond mere natural inclination, insofar as it involves the intellectual appetite of the soul, which can desire the things it apprehends. In a word, what we are by *nature*, that we *stretch* ourselves, and that we stretch ourselves toward *knowing*—these concepts are all inextricably bound together.

Now, as for the concept of *knowing*, what is it, and how does it relate to the realization of what it means to be human? First of all, to say that we seek knowledge by nature is also to say that we *lack knowledge* by nature. Even from this it is evident that we stand in a rather ambiguous relation to our simultaneous *having* and *not having* knowledge. The clearest expression of this may be that the only positive claim on knowledge that Socrates ever makes is that *he does not have knowledge*. In the *Thaetetus*, he forms an analogy between his relation to knowledge and a midwife's relation to the babies she delivers.⁴ Not having a baby herself, the midwife is experienced or skilled in the art of bringing babies into the world; analogously, Socrates lacks knowledge, but is skilled in the art of bringing knowledge into the world, in helping others to bring it out from within themselves. In this way, knowledge properly belongs to Socrates only insofar as he is able to engage in the activity of dynamically pursuing it, rather than as

⁴ Plato, *Thaetetus*, 24.

far as he is able to obtain it once and for all, as an ultimate goal; at the same time, however, his pursuit of knowledge can only be truly called *a pursuit* if there is a genuine promise, an anticipation of the future, that his desire will someday be satisfied, just as we can desire only insofar as our desires can be satisfied. This does not present a problem, when we remember that his desire for knowledge can never be satisfied in the sense that his ignorance will be removed, but only in the sense that, in his ignorance, his desire for knowledge satisfies itself in the very activity of his desire, that is, *in the dynamic pursuit itself*. Because Socrates acknowledges his position as one who lacks knowledge, he is seen as the wisest and most knowledgeable of all human beings; the highest expression of his possessing knowledge, his *having* knowledge in the fullest sense of the word, is found expressly in the dynamic activity through which he pursues it—that is, from a position of *not having* it.

But here we find a good opportunity to see how someone like Aquinas, who begins within an attitude of faith, may be able to reconceive Aristotelian notions in a new light—the conditions for which may not have been explicitly present in Aristotle’s work itself, but which are not necessarily discontinuous with his line of thinking. Now again, we see both the concepts of birth and of growth in the word ‘nature’—the ostensible tension between freedom and constraint in what constitutes us as human beings; in having our natures given from without, are we defying our natures in actively willing the object of our desire? And again, such tension is somewhat resolved if we

remember that 'mind' and 'nature' are not, for Aristotle, at odds with one another, but bear the relation of a means to an end. But what happens to the tension when we illuminate that deceptively ordinary-looking word, 'given,' and perceive our present circumstance in that light? Insofar as our natures are 'given' to us, they are given from without and, as such, what it means to be human is prescribed, somehow, by what we are *not*. It is this external act that defines us as finite beings; if we were not given our natures from an act outside of us, then our natures as such would always have existed—and we would not exist in time, but outside of it. If we were not given life at some point in time, we would either have always existed, or would never have existed; thus it is in this concept of our natures as given from without that the question now arises: Why do we exist, rather than not? Why does anything exist, rather than nothing at all? Although this question refers to the most basic metaphysical problem, it is also a tacit acknowledgment of the finitude and fragility of the human condition and the world in which we live, and obliquely seeks to understand *what* could possibly have motivated that first act by which we received our nature as such. When we understand our nature as *given* in this way, we understand our nature as of a *gift given*—and instead of resting satisfied to pursue the question 'why,' we are suddenly compelled to regard our humanity as something for which to be *grateful*. In regarding our nature as a gift, we feel, along with the wonder 'why' it was given to us in this way, the deeper wonder 'that' it was given to us in this way—the wonder that we exist *at all*. The question of

'why' may be an expression of wonder just about the causes of things, but it is born of another wonder—wonder, purely and simply, *that* things are. It is *this* kind of wonder, the wonder *that*, which is the real basis of our gratitude. But the wonder does not stop there; whenever we are grateful, we are grateful not just for something, but also *to someone*. The concept of gratitude cannot exist without the concept of someone to whom we are indebted, someone to whom we owe thanks. For Aristotle, the first principle of metaphysics, the alignment of the divine intellect with god, was made manifest by an 'it'; here, however, thanks to the feeling of gratitude in the face of that which we have been given, the divine can refer only to a *who*, and the act of giving a gift cannot be seen as anything other than an act of *love*.

Having received our natures by an act of love, it is our duty to respond to the act with another loving act; the essence with which we have been created was at one with the act by which we were created, and as such it is our essence, our nature, to respond to the call of love. When someone we know gives us a gift, we are obliged to thank him; if we think of all the occasions upon which we have been obliged to perform this common act of courtesy, or to express thanks in any ordinary or general kind of way, we cannot but tend toward banality. But concealed within our ordinary expression of thanks, there lies a hidden multitude of various possible meanings, none of which are actually banal. We give thanks not only to one another upon receipt of a gift, but we also use the word in relation to a cause of an effect, where the latter is indebted to the former for its

existence—that is, ‘thanks to the tautness of the cord, the tightrope dancer is able to move across easily.’ We also use the word in the sense of blame or responsibility: ‘I only have myself to thank for the catastrophic turn of events.’ In another sense, we give thanks as a way of expressing acknowledgment, admiration or love for one another, as when we say ‘thank you for being alive.’ The senses of the word are many and varied, but what they all share in common is a sense of acknowledging not only the cause of a thing, but also a kind of responsibility or indebtedness to that cause.

When we envision this cause as outside of us rather than inside of us, as transcendent rather than immanent, a certain kind of obligation arises—but not in the sense that we must somehow *go against ourselves* in responding to the call. Our nature, like the revelation of faith itself, comes to us as a completely unmerited gift from without; and yet it nevertheless resonates with a desire that is located within the recipient. There is nothing, in our nature as human beings, which requires that the divine grant us a face-to-face meeting; God does not *owe* us anything, nor do we have a *right* to make any claim upon him. However, God’s grace does not come as a total shock to our human nature, imposing itself in violence or destroying what it means for us to be human; the gift of nature, like the gift of faith, does not annul our knowledge-seeking quality, nor does it replace or cancel out our faculty of reason. In other words, the desire for knowledge that is immanent in our nature as human beings is not in conflict with the presence of the transcendent by God’s grace. Our nature bears the sense both of birth

and of growth as though the latter is indebted to the former, as though our growth is an active response to the call of our birth. In this sense we might say that it is our task not just to catch up with ourselves as human beings, but also to transcend ourselves in God. What unites all human beings into the whole of humankind is not just given to us at birth, but it also demands that we actively fulfill the scope of our own possibility, that we reach ever toward the limits of our possible human experience. Just as there is no human that has ever escaped from such a call to transcend the bounds of human nature, so is there no human being who has ever failed to love, in being loved by God—that is, as long as there is beauty, that we may see, no human being will ever escape from love. This invocation of sight reminds us of its deep connection with knowing; just as knowing, nature, and transcending ourselves are all tied together for Aristotle, so does *love* have an equal share in that unity for us—and yet love, as it seems, is marked by *possession* in a way that knowledge is *not*. It remains to find out *how*.

3. On Poetry and the Creative Imagination

When we think of Aristotle's famous dictum that poetry is finer, more serious, and 'more philosophical than history,'¹ we find at its heart the philosophical principles of potentiality and actuality, and the ways these two relate to his concept of *motion*, of dynamic activity. In his distinction between *poiein*, to make, and *prattein*, to act, it is apparently out of a preference for the former that Aristotle's dictum finds its force; where history is concerned solely with what is already there, as it were, poetry and philosophy ultimately concern themselves with what is possible, and actively seek not just to express the possibility of possibility, but even more, to live out that very possibility, to stretch ourselves out towards the living realization and active embodiment of what was once mere latent possibility.

The concepts of actuality and potentiality represent a crucial dichotomy between the possibility any thing can be said to have, and the activity whereby a possibility is realized. For Aristotle, not all possibilities are of the same kind; he makes a distinction between one sense of potentiality as of something that may happen to be realized of its own accord if there is nothing to hinder it from doing so, and another sense of potentiality as of something that must be actively achieved, or done *well*. This distinction amounts to the same thing as the difference between something that appears

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, § 9.

to occur by chance, and something whose nature is stable, persistent, and tending towards a particular kind of action. The Greek word δύναμις (*dunamis*) may be translated as potential, power, possibility, capability, strength, force, or ability. The Greek words ἐνέργεια (*energeia*) and ἐντελέχεια (*entelecheia*), both coined by Aristotle, are a bit more complicated, since they are two distinct concepts whose meanings are intended to converge; although most translators refer to them interchangeably as ‘actuality,’ the distinction between them is illuminating. Both words refer to something being its own particular kind of action, or work, as they are when they are not merely potentially real, but real in the fullest possible sense.

Energeia, as we can see quite clearly at the surface, refers to a kind of energy or work—what Joe Sachs translates as ‘being-at-work’; in order to show the distinction between potency and being-at-work, Aristotle gives us, rather than a definition, a number of examples, such as the distinction between one who is sleeping and one who is awake, between one who has sight but whose eyes are closed and one who sees with open eyes, between the one who knows how to build and one who is building, between a sculpted Hermes and a block of wood, between a half line and a whole.² He points out that since not all things that are said to be in activity are alike, we can only use these instances as analogues for the relation between potency and being-at-work. This is precisely what prevents him from giving the word its own definition; potency or

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 175.

potential is most clearly understood in terms of a capacity for motion or change, but being-at-work is usually reserved for the activities that are not motions in themselves, but forms of realized actuality.

This is where *entelecheia* comes in, which Sachs translates as ‘being-at-work-staying-the-same,’ and which is a good deal more complex. According to Sachs, ‘Aristotle invents the word by combining *entelēs* (complete, full-grown) with *echein* (hexis, to be a certain way by the continuing effort of holding on in that condition), while at the same time punning on *endelecheia* (persistence) by inserting *telos* (completion). This is a three-ring circus of a word, at the heart of everything in Aristotle’s thinking, including the definition of motion.’³ In contrast to *energeia* or being-at-work, which refers to the end or completion of any being, *entelecheia* refers to completeness in the sense of the continuous being-at-work of any being, when something is doing its complete work. The meanings of the two words thus converge insofar as they both depend on the idea that every being’s ‘thinghood,’ what makes something *what it is*, is a kind of *work*, a way of its being in *motion*. Every being that exists not just in potentiality but also in actuality is a being-at-work, and tends toward being-at-work in a way that constitutes its proper, complete way. Again, to quote Joe Sachs, ‘Just as *energeia* extends to *entelecheia* because it is the activity which makes a thing what it is, *entelecheia* extends

³ Joe Sachs, *Aristotle’s Physics: A Guided Study*, 245.

to *energeia* because it is the end or perfection which has being only in, through, and during activity.’⁴

Once again, the idea of motion is a vital part of this actuality-potentiality dichotomy for Aristotle. In the *Physics*, Aristotle defines motion as the actuality (*entelecheia*) of a potentiality *as such*.⁵ But in light of the fact that actuality and potentiality are usually thought to be in contrast to one another, this definition appears to harbor a difficult contradiction, one that cannot be resolved once and for all. One possible way of interpreting this statement is that motion describes the *passage* from potentiality to actuality, as though the motion itself contains neither the potential, nor the actual, but is only the mode of transmission from one to the other. If we take this to be true, then what we translate as ‘actuality’ in Aristotle’s statement would be better expressed by something like ‘actualization,’ which describes the final state in which something *has been* actualized from *out of* the state of potency; but this kind of substitution would not be loyal to Aristotle’s definition of *entelecheia*, being-at-work-staying-the-same, which refers, again, to the activity that makes a being *what it really is*, and to the end or completion that has being only insofar as it is *in and through* its activity. Where ‘actualization’ bears the sense of the state in which something has *already passed* from potentiality into actuality, this is like the being-at-work of *energeia*, and as such, it

⁴ Joe Sachs, *Aristotle: Motion and its Place in Nature*, § 2.

⁵ Joe Sachs, *Physics*, 74.

refers to a static form of completion, and does not involve motion at all. Some argue that the apparent contradiction between potentiality and actuality in Aristotle's definition of motion is resolved in the idea that, in every motion, actuality and potentiality are *mixed* or *blended*. I think this would be similar to Aquinas' interpretation of Aristotle's account of motion. This interpretation of the scenario has the characteristic that, to the extent that something is actual, it is not potential, and to the extent that it is potential, it is not actual; the hotter the water is, the less it is potentially hot, and the cooler it is, the less it is actually, the more it is potentially, hot. But this, too, seems to suggest, along with the first interpretation, that the actuality of potentiality itself does not persist, is not itself stable, but exists only as a changing proportion between what has and has not yet been actualized.

One way in which we may be able to resolve this issue is in imagining the following scenario, in which there are two alternative kinds of potential. Consider an arrow in flight, released from the tension of a bow and approaching its target through the atmosphere. The first kind of potentiality would be that which is actualized, that is, once the arrow has reached its target. Its potential for being at the target has become actual *only* when it arrives at the target, or is actual only in proportion to the closeness of its goal. The second kind of potentiality, the one I believe is true to Aristotle's definition, is that which consists in the arrow's moving trajectory from bow-string to target. In other words, as the arrow is moving from the bow towards its target, its potential to

reach its target *is actual* precisely *as potential*—it is actual *just as* potentiality—and therefore its potential is actual *as such*. The actuality of the arrow's potentiality to reach its final target is nothing other than its dynamic movement towards its goal. Whereas the persistent *entelecheia*, the 'being-at-work-staying-itself' of potency as material is 'thinghood,' the *entelecheia* of potency as potency is nothing other than *motion*.

Now, to return to Aristotle's characterization of poetry as higher and more philosophical than history, we find that it is by virtue of an emphasis on *motion*, the dynamic activity of realizing what is possible, rather than on what has achieved absolute actualization, that this hierarchy arises. This amounts to the distinction between the act of *making* and the act of *doing*—*poiein* and *prattein*—with a marked preference for the creative act as a higher expression of being. The creative act of *making* something corresponds with the dynamic actuality of potentiality in motion, insofar as it is the act of realizing, of making actual, the latent possibility that a thing has *to be*, to exist, in reality. Likewise, poetry, since it is concerned with the creation of new ways to express in language the inherent possibility that something has of being expressed, of being realized, also corresponds with this concept of motion.

There are many different instances wherein we find a thinker confronting the idea that philosophy is better expressed as poetry. In Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, a 'Dialectical Lyric,' this idea is presented as a kind of *problematic* for the pseudonymous writer, Johannes de Silentio. Throughout the work, the reader is forced to ask himself

which parts of the book are dialectical, and which parts lyrical—one is always compelled to determine whether the work as a whole is philosophy *or* poetry. The *problemata* take on a dialectical form, as they address their given questions through a series of alternatives: either Abraham is the father of faith or he is lost, etc. Johannes proceeds through the *problemata*, more in accord with the Hegelian sense of dialectic than the Socratic, setting up opposing pairs and mediating between them. On the other hand, Johannes challenges many of Hegel's ideas, most notably, the idea that qualitative change comes about through quantitative change. Where Hegelian dialectics encompass the entire history of philosophy, Johannes explicitly warns us against the view that the task of one generation is any different from the task of any previous generation. His frequent warnings against 'not stopping with faith' are also in part a response to Hegel, who takes faith as a lower expression of *Absolute Spirit* than philosophy; and Johannes' wish, on the contrary, is to show that faith is a task for a lifetime, rather than a jumping-off point. He does not see faith as something that marks the border-line between what we already know and what we want to know, but rather as the very limit of possibility for human life, something after which we can always strive, rather than something we must get over or move past, whether we pretend to apprehend it or reject it. In one very strong sense, then, this book presents a challenge to the concept of Hegelian dialectic as an historical movement; on the other hand, it is true, at least in content, to the concept of dialectic as a manner of drawing out contradictions and negating them, as of a *reductio*

ad absurdum proof, in a manner true to Socrates and the Socratic stance of ignorance. Ultimately, unlike a reductio ad absurdum, we are not left with a definitive answer that resolves all of our difficulties; Johannes uses a dialectical argument not to resolve the paradox, but only to shed light on its immediacy, its reality, and its quality of rendering us sleepless. His task as a philosopher is not to make something that is incomprehensible *less incomprehensible*, but rather to make the incomprehensibility more salient. In this sense, Johannes de Silentio's philosophical argument is *silent*, in that it does not claim to be able to give faith, or even to *have* faith, but understands itself precisely *as a lack of understanding*, and its task is show the impossibility of the author *as philosopher* in becoming the knight of faith. In this sense, philosophy knows that it cannot make the movement of faith on its own; on the other hand, the author's infinite resignation must not be seen as any kind of substitute for faith. For that would mean that there is no more one can do than to philosophize.

In light of Aristotle's claim that poetry is finer and more philosophical than history, and in light of his teaching about actuality and potentiality, or possibility, it is out of a preference for the latter, the significance of the poet as a *maker*, as *one who makes*, that leads us to regard the creative and imaginative power as superior to the present or historical actuality. The poet is not concerned with what already is, or what has already been, but only with what is possible, and as such he is concerned not merely with actuality, but with *ideal actuality*. In the Eulogy, Johannes tells us that God created the

poet because the world is not desolate or without comfort; it is the poet's work to show that there is a unity that binds all humans together as humanity. The poet is not the hero, but as the poet, he *loves* the hero, and for this he is no less happy than the one he loves. Here, it is miraculously suggested that the man of faith and the one who contemplates him in love, are equal in happiness, blessedness, and greatness. But later on, Silentio reminds us several times not only that he is *not* a poet, but also that the man of faith is the *only* truly happy one. What of this contradiction, and what of the fact that Silentio tells us that he is neither philosopher nor poet? He consistently aligns the poet with the knight of infinite resignation; moreover, in his use of irony, he also makes the movement of infinity, insofar as irony is self-reflexive. Irony is a way of saying something by means of *not saying it*—in other words, irony is a kind of *silence*. Like Socrates, Silentio ironically assumes a stance of ignorance in order to proceed dialectically through rational argumentation; and yet, the very thing that enables him to assume this stance is his passion, perhaps the basis of the lyrical. His ironic use of dialectic is *passionate* in the sense that it is sleepless, anxious, and distraught—and it seeks to communicate this feeling to the readers as well. At least in part, then, it is the irony of Silentio, the silence of Silentio, that makes this book 'lyrical,' insofar as it is the irony, and not the dialectic itself, that bears the passion whereby we may engage in the creative and imaginative act that is required to be truly, deeply moved by the paradox of faith. Silentio is not a philosopher, because his argument does not proceed from a

rational presupposition; but neither is he a poet, because he is constrained by the requirement to employ rational argument. And yet he is precisely both—both philosopher and poet—philosopher insofar as he shows what he is *not* able to do, which is to have or give faith, and poet insofar as he is able to show what poetry *can* do, which is to move us to the point of creatively imagining ourselves in ideal actuality, to move us to the point of being sleepless in the face of the paradox, by means of creative and imaginative action. In his use of both philosophy and poetry, Johannes conveys his message by means of what he *cannot say* with words, and what he can only come closer to conveying by means of *poetic action*.

Poetic action seeks to engage the imaginative movement from possibility to actuality, whereby what is impossible for humanity is rendered possible in the divine; as such, it cannot express its message by *saying it*, because it is in some sense ignorant of its own end, but it can seek to *make* something that engages our passion and renders us sleepless. In this poetic action, by actively and imaginatively engaging with possibility, we have a kind of power, an ability of our own, even if it cannot ever get us all the way to faith by itself. But whereas philosophy is always constrained by that which it is unable to express or attain, as of a *limitation* that prevents it from getting at what it seeks, poetry does not tend to see that which it cannot say as an impediment or a limitation, but instead, as a *limit*, which defines the furthest possible boundary of all human existence. Where the one does not stop with faith, does not stop with doubting, but

always wants to go *further*, the other sees all the doubting, and the faith, as an adequate task for every human life. As philosopher, Johannes de Silentio is silent as one who is bound by his limitations; as poet, he is silent as one who is set free by his limits. As silent philosopher and silent poet, Johannes de Silentio is powerless and powerful, impotent and omnipotent; as *John*, or 'everyman,' he embodies in this tension that which unites all human beings as humankind. And the one who encounters this tension in passion, who is at once powerless and powerful, is the one who runs up against the paradox of faith, the one who is rendered sleepless.

Another illuminating instance that contains or addresses the strange convergence in opposition of poetry and philosophy, but in altogether a different way, is Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Although many people might argue that this work is not overtly *poetic*, it is poetic in the sense that its literary form is dramatic and fragmentary, and always seems to express the insatiable thirst for the fulfillment of human possibility. Within the conception of the mind as capable of acquiring moral and intellectual skills in seeking knowledge, what we sometimes fail to remember is that the active exercise of the creative imagination is a power or a form of knowing just as much as any other cognitive form—indeed, it may be that the creative imagination is the highest expression of our human nature to seek knowledge than any other kind, insofar as it does its work without the need for rational explanation, but is fueled by sheer wonder. Fergus Kerr offers some valuable insight into this kind of wonder with respect

to Wittgenstein's comments on the existence of God in *Culture and Value*, from which he quotes as follows:

If the believer in God looks around and asks "Where does everything I see come from?," "Where does all that come from?," what he hankers after is not a causal explanation; and the point of his question is that it is the expression of this hankering. He is expressing, then, a stance towards all explanations.—But how is this manifested in his life?⁶

As Kerr says, the point of this question, which is essentially the question of why there is something rather than nothing, is not to obtain a causal explanation that will satisfy its search; although this question, as the fundamental question of metaphysical philosophy, may serve only to lead itself into the search for causal explanations by means of rational argumentation, it is, in its rawness, *not* merely an expression of our obsession with causal explanation.⁷ Instead, it is an expression of the wonder *that* things are, which, as such, does not concern itself with *explanations of any kind*. It expresses an *attitude*, not just towards the relative nature of all explanations, but also towards one's real, active life in the world. That 'therapeutic' characterization of Wittgenstein's works, which so often lends itself to cliché and tragic misappropriation, shows itself here not just in the way it can alleviate the pain of frustration at our failure to obtain absolute truth, but also in the way it can help us to change our attitude towards our desire for

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 96.

⁷ Fergus Kerr, *Work on Oneself*, 50.

absolute truth, and thus to change the whole direction of our lives. Instead of supplying a solution to the problem of our failure, we must cease to see our failure *as failure*—and the problem as such disappears. In this attitude, we are awakened to the sublimity of that original wonder—the wonder *that* things exist *at all*—and we are released from the shackles of our metaphysical failure. This is what the contemplation of God is all about, this raw wonder in the face of possibility, which beholds in reverent awe the very limits of finitude.

The distinction between limits and limitations, which is at work in *Fear and Trembling*, is also at work in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Running up against the limit of human possibility must not be seen as something that hinders us from going places or doing things of which we are only darkly aware and yet unable to achieve; far from hindering the dynamic movement of the creative imagination, the pure wonder *that* things are is both the moving and final cause of our tendency to seek knowledge, and as such, it serves as a task for a lifetime, not a wall that defeats the movement of our desires. The limit of human possibility is not an impediment, but a source of inspiration and incessant activity; again, the desire we have, which is inherent in our nature as human beings, is only a *desire* insofar as it can be said to be satisfied in some way. Even if the original purity of our wonder becomes distorted by the pursuit of philosophical questioning, and even if in this process we may sometimes lose

sight of the fact that what we strive for is not ultimately forbidden to us, if we are able to carry out our pursuit in light of having reawakened ourselves to the purity of this wonder *that things are*, which in itself seeks no explanation, then we may be able to attain some kind of peace, some kind of deep happiness, however momentary or fleeting it may be. It is the task of the creative imagination, as the highest expression of our nature to seek knowledge, to keep this wonder at the forefront of our search, and to discover in this manner the kind of peace that finds rest only in movement.

4. On Death and Suffering

Again, the word 'nature' offers at first glance the dual sense of birth and growth; but there is also hidden within it, less evident on the surface but perhaps even more imperatively, the concept of our *death*. That we are given our natures from an external act of creation is what affords us our mortality, and defines us as finite beings. If death is the limit of human existence, it may be compared to the concept of the limit of human possibility, rather than the limitation that bars our way from greater goods, and as such, it can be seen as a source of inspiration, a source that drives our dynamic movement in pursuit of the fulfillment of our natures, rather than as an impediment or a blockade that prevents us from being who we really want to be. Since it is our natures to desire to transcend ourselves in the divine, death, as the moment of our finitude, serves as the backdrop of this pursuit; nothing constitutes us as *finite beings* more than our desire to transcend our finitude in the infinite—nothing makes us more *human* than our desire to transcend our humanity in God.

Insofar as we are able, it is our task as human beings to transcend ourselves thus. It is the work of the creative imagination to awaken us to wonder, and to cultivate the expression of active movement towards the fulfillment of human possibility. Our natures, as such, are given as a gift from without, and it is our duty to respond in gratitude to this act of love. But what is the difference between *earning a right* and

receiving a gift? We cannot by our own strength obtain the gift ourselves, as we have seen in *Fear and Trembling*; that is where *earning* stops. But mustn't we in some sense, if not earn it, at least *deserve* it? Mustn't we show ourselves to be worthy of receiving it? Or is it rather even-handedly arbitrary? Even when we regard ourselves as having limits, rather than limitations, we are still bound within those limits; instead of removing difficulty after difficulty in pursuit of knowing, the difficulty seems only to *increase*, the more we transcend ourselves along the way. There is a circle that encompasses the bounds of human existence, and its circumference signifies the limit of possibility. We expand ever outward towards the circumference, but we have never yet encountered a human being who appears to have actually *met* with that circumference. Indeed, the moment we believe ourselves to have approached the circumference of the circle, it seems to expand out away from us, before our very eyes. It is a little known fact that it is more difficult to *receive* a gift than to give one; in this painful reception of the gift, as an *active* reception, we stumble upon the occasion of transcending ourselves in God.

It may indeed be true that the clearest expression we have of where the imagination *ends* is in death. Death presents a limit for us—not as a punishment for failure or a limitation to be crossed over into something brighter and more perfect and *less human*—but rather as the inexorable *nothing* against which everything finite is held up. As *nothing*, we cannot *imagine* it; as soon as one tries to imagine not just the experience of *dying*, but also, even more importantly, the actual possibility of *being*

dead—there is *nothing*. And yet, insofar as it signifies the limit of all human experience, death, like birth and growth, also bears the sense of expansion, realization, the fulfillment of one's nature. We might even venture that one who has met with the limit of the circle, must also be one who has met with death; but then one must ask whether it is possible to die *before* one *actually* dies. For if it is *not* possible, then there is no living human being who has ever transcended his nature to that extent, and there never will be (—unless, of course, the soul lives on in the afterlife, of which I cannot speak here.) Since death is the limit of the circle, this must, at least in one sense, be true. But is it possible that in the imaginative confrontation with death, we are able to *meet* with it in some way? In the active and creative act by which we try to imagine ourselves *into* death, all we can do is bump up against it such that it seems to reflect back on us nothing but *more life*. The closer we get to death—the more frequently and violently we bump up against it, the more does it seem to us so very *far away*, the more do we find ourselves *alive*. In a sense, it is only by means of this kind of confrontation with death that we can truly grasp what an outlandish event it was to be *born* in the first place; without coming face to face with death, one cannot realize the beauty of the act in which we are born, and through which we live and grow. The confrontation with death has a way of illuminating life, of making it *more real*, more immediate, and more beautiful—as Wallace Stevens once said, 'death is the mother of beauty.'¹ Never is one more conscious

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Sunday Morning*.

of the world *as gift* than when one reflects upon the nothing of death, the dark glass whose reflection is so radiant. And yet, this wild, spontaneous burst of beauty that finds its source in facing death is *still* not something we may gain by our own strength. We may have stretched ourselves out toward knowing, we may have actively engaged in the creative fulfillment of our natures, but we still cannot, by our own means, obtain that beauty for ourselves—for it comes as a gift from without. It is possible that the only time that death does not appear to be the occasion for great beauty, it is only because we are somehow unable to *accept* the gift in *love*, and thus refuse the call to transcend ourselves in God. Coming to realize ourselves as human beings is the most wonderful gift of all, but it is an extremely painful business; the act by which we were born and by which we live out our destiny is at once the act by which we are rendered finite, imperfect, and suffering, and we cannot see the beauty of the world in isolation from the suffering.

One place to look for an instance of the confrontation with death is in Tolstoy's story of the death of Ivan Ilych. After having lived a perfectly *satisfactory* life, filled with power, ambition and material success, social and civic propriety, Ivan Ilych suddenly finds himself having to face death. Even throughout the terrible physical suffering he experiences, the pain that truly cuts him the deepest is not, in fact, *physical*, but *moral* pain; in the face of his fast-approaching mortality, Ivan is tormented by the question he has never yet encountered head on—that is, the question of whether he has lived the

right life. And when he discovers, to his profound dismay, that the answer he must inevitably give himself is *no*, the question that then pervades his heart is whether or not it is *too late*, after all, to make amends for what he has missed. Over the course of three days of immense physical agony, as he drifts between waking life and dream-like illusion, Ivan's approaching death comes to find a creative expression in the image of being shoved down into a deep, dark sack. This image, of course, evokes the experience of a prisoner who is waiting to die by execution, where one's head is covered with a black cloth and the moment of death can only be realized indirectly by the movements one is forced to make, the noise of one's surroundings, and the knowledge of what inevitably happens in such a situation. Ivan feels imprisoned by this sack, just as he is imprisoned by his body, his mind—indeed his entire being—as of one who is *not free*, and whose death serves as a *punishment* for how he has lived his life. But the image of the black sack evolves into something new for Ivan, the more time he spends with his suffering, and it comes to evoke another thought, one that is much less ominous and is not without some kind of beauty and hope for what lies ahead. As Ivan finds himself being pushed further and further down into the dark depths of the black sack by some unknown and unstoppable force, he suddenly sees something shining at the bottom. What this new development evokes is the image of *birth*, as of a newborn baby moving through the birth canal towards life and the light of day, and as such, it is an image of freedom, possibility, purity, and love. It is at this very moment, one hour before he dies,

that Ivan has 'had it revealed to him that his life might not have been what it should have, but there was still time to make up for it.'²

Far from having achieved this on his own, this light is *revealed* to Ivan just moments before he dies; how, then, can he possibly think that he can somehow *set right* the error of his life in this vanishing moment of time? We must ask how he can feel this way, not only in light of how little time he inevitably knows is left, but also in light of the fact that this light, this hope, is distinctly revealed to him, *given* to him, as from an external force? After this revelatory moment, Ivan finds himself in an entirely new attitude towards the people around him and the ways in which he can be with them in the world. He wants to comfort them, to tell them that his death is not to be feared, but embraced, and yet he cannot muster the strength; nevertheless, he consoles himself with the thought that, instead of *talking*, it is only indeed by *acting* that he may best communicate this thought to them anyway. Having found himself within this new attitude of love and hope, he searches himself for the suffering that has been attendant upon him for these three terrible days—and he cannot find it. He searches himself for the fear of death to which he has grown so accustomed—but it simply is not there.

'He searched for the fear of death he had grown used to but he could not find it. Where was it? What death? He was without any kind of fear because death was nowhere near him.

Instead of death there was light.

"So that's what it is!" he suddenly uttered aloud. *What gladness!*

² Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, 104.

For him this all happened in a single instant, an instant whose meaning was no longer in flux. For the people assembled his agony would go on for another two hours. In his breast something rattled; a wheeze passed through his haggard body. In time the rattling and wheezing grew less and less frequent.

“It’s the end!” somebody said above him.

He heard these words and began repeating them in his heart. *It’s the end of my death*, he said to himself. *There won’t be anything else.*

He pulled in a breath, stopped halfway through it, straightened himself out, and died.³

In the novella’s last words, we find the expression of death as the backdrop of life, of death as a limit instead of a limitation, as a gift instead of a punishment. It is only against this backdrop of death that Ivan can do the work of *receiving* the gift of life—the most painful and most beautiful of all possible gifts. When we ask how it is possible that one can somehow ‘make up for’ one’s life within the vanishing, infinitesimally small moments that signify the fragility of finitude, we can find no suitable explanation, and yet it seems that *this is real*.

Having spent most of his life avoiding the subject of death, having dismissed it altogether as a kind of irksome buzzing noise interrupting his concepts of power, success, and the gratification of superficial and material desires, Ivan finally finds that, in the end, his death is not a limitation that forbids him access to what he truly wants, but rather a limit, a task, a kind of place-marker for both the moving and final cause of the totality of human possibility; he is able to make amends for what he feels are his failures in the fleeting moments before his death because his death, precisely when it is

³ Ibid, 106.

closest to him, becomes something infinitely far away and exceeding his present grasp—and yet this is a comfort to him, something that affords him peace, hope, and love. As he feels himself taking his last breaths, he does not see them as the end of his life, but rather as *the end of his death*, as though his every waking moment in life has essentially been *his death*—or at least, the preparation for it. Death, as the end of all human possibility, is not something that can be dismissed, conquered, moved past or gotten *beyond* insofar as it is in itself the task for an entire life—and everything leading up to its fulfillment is a fluid movement towards it, not in the sense that it serves to interrupt us, but in the sense that it marks the totality of our existence as finite beings, the moment of our *greatest movement*, rather than the moment at which we necessarily *cease to move*. As a limit, it cannot be reached or crossed over, but only bumped up against, with the slightest brush of the fingertips; far from preventing us from being better, happier, stronger, our mortality is the very thing that sets us in motion, as it were, that serves as the backdrop for our greatest creative expression and our deepest love. What Ivan finds in the end is that, far from hating his finitude, or wishing against the reality of his nature to live forever, his approaching death is rather the opportunity to reawaken the wonder *that* things are—precisely the kind of wonder that defies explanation and finds peace in its restlessness, power in its powerlessness, activity in its capacity to *receive*, and its highest possible expression in none other than its *silence*.

Ivan's experience of death as a kind of birth and growth forces us to return to and reevaluate the concept of our 'nature' as human beings; it is nothing but our finitude that has us strive to transcend it in the infinite, and it is nothing but our humanity that has us seek to transcend it in God. Strive we may, and seek we must, but not without remembering to be grateful for what makes us who we are, as such, and not without actively and creatively setting ourselves in motion against the backdrop of fragility, suffering, and death. When we consider Aristotle's ascending ladder towards the philosophical contemplation of the divine, it may be easy to lose sight of the fact that our pursuit of knowledge is not necessarily a cumulative, hierarchical form of achieving ultimate satisfaction; the idea that such contemplation is reserved for an elite class of super-human philosophers may further serve to distract us from the fact that such a pursuit is bestowed, not upon one or two or a few of our fellow members of humanity, but rather upon *all of us*. Even Aquinas' concession that the contemplation of God is available to everyone may at times seem to darken the nature of our goals, insofar as it ostensibly proceeds in search of rational explanation. But what both share in common, in their recognition of divine contemplation as the highest expression of humanity and the highest form of happiness that a human being may hope for, is the idea that such contemplation itself is *not rational*. Far from being sensible experience, rational cognition or discursive thought, contemplation of the divine is, at least for Aristotle, more like *intuition* than anything else—intuition, like feeling, that is characterized, again, by a

peculiar mix of having and not having, as though even in its most restful, peaceful expression, it is always and eternally in motion, in active and dynamic pursuit of itself, as it were. At both the inception and the end of the metaphysical questioning for causal explanation, there lies the active wonder *that* things are, the active and contemplative kind of knowing that, in itself, does not concern itself with any kind of rational explanation. Where death is the backdrop of life, this kind of wonder may be awakened and reawakened again and again and again, losing sight of itself in the process, and yet always coming back to itself in its original naked purity.

As I sit by the side of the bed where my stepfather lays dying, I am struck by the fragility of life. How is it possible that yesterday, he was walking, talking, eating, laughing, providing some small semblance of comfort to my mother in her consuming fear and her all-consuming pain, and here he lies now, unable to see, to feel, to speak, to move, save for the few light squeezes he delivers with his frail hand as it clutches my trembling one? I am overwhelmed with sadness, frustration, and compassion, to see someone once so formidable, so dignified, now humiliated, rendered powerless by the external force of the tumor that rapidly gnaws at his brain—and to witness what appears to be nothing short of a hostile *interruption* of the beautiful love he has shared with my mother, the wonderful new life they have created together, and the inspiration I have had from witnessing their love. But at the very moment I feel those few faint squeezes upon my shaking hand, I am suddenly, surprisingly, overwhelmed with nothing but

love and gratitude, and tears stream down my face as from some interminable depth of happiness. What suffering, what humility, what pain—but just see how he squeezes my hand!—what tragedy, what irony, what silence—but listen to what he tells me with his heart! As I sit with him, my heart and my entire being oscillating violently between screaming, imploring ‘why?’ and silently thanking him, thanking God, for the revelation *that* things are this way, for what he can do with his fragile hand, I find that all of my deepest philosophical problems collapse beneath the weight of the world. To the question of whether there is anything more we can *do* but to philosophize, to pose these metaphysical questions in striving to transcend ourselves, to seek the valid explanation that will lift this terrible burden from our frail shoulders, I find myself uttering *yes, emphatically yes!* As I sit there silently, with this mountain of a man now reduced to a few light grasps at my hand, I find that my striving after knowledge is rewarded here, now—in the sheer awe that I feel in the face of this great mystery, and the immense and interminable gratitude I feel for the life I have shared with this man. No doubt I will again find myself seeking causal explanations, the ultimate satisfaction of which will never arrive in the form in which I expect it, and yet here I am, here I sit, enshrouded in wonder, love, and gratitude for my short time here on this earth, and which has been given to me as of something over which I have no ultimate control, but is *mine* nonetheless. What first felt like an imprisonment, a limitation, an interruption, suddenly strikes me as the ultimate freedom, the incredible power we have to *make* something of

ourselves, and I drift gently back and forth between power and powerlessness, finitude and the infinite, humanity and God. If only we could keep this for ourselves, if only, once we realize this, we had the power at our fingertips to awaken and reawaken ourselves at will to this precious gift, throughout the process of our search, we would find time and time again that what ostensibly serves to obscure our path in love and life is a necessary part of the process of trying to heighten our awareness to the wonder to which we are born, and to which we are indebted, as the beautiful, fragile, imperfect and finite beings that we are. The active reception of the gift of grace is a painful business—indeed, it is the most painful business of all. But just as we come into this world crying, welcomed by those who love us in gratitude and joy, so we leave it, amidst the suffering of others at the loss of our lives, smiling and laughing in wonderful gratitude—embraced and welcomed by the wonder that *we are*.

But how can I know that my experience at my stepfather's bedside truly corresponds to his experience holding my hand? After all, he couldn't speak to me to say so, he couldn't make any other movement, or even look me in the eye. Isn't it just as possible that his squeezing my hand was merely a physical reaction he was having of some kind, or a futile attempt to communicate to me some need that I failed to understand and therefore failed to alleviate in his suffering? Perhaps I just imagined it all. And yet, what if I *did* imagine it? Does that even matter now? In light of what I got out of those last moments with him, and in light of my active participation in that

moment with love and death, what happened for me is *real*—and it will always be *real*. After Tolstoy had written those beautiful words on the death of Ivan Ilych, he was forced to admit, on his own death-bed, that his life amounted to nothing for him—that perhaps he had had it all wrong—just as the character he created did. We cannot know what death will be like, nor can we know what dying will be like, until we actually do it—and yet we have these encounters with death, *real* encounters with life and death, all the time. Who knows if dying will be like what I have imagined it to be like from reading novels or sitting at someone’s bedside as they drift away? Only the ones who are dying can truly know that; but we *imagine* it thus, we envision this or that possibility, and what meaning we can find there, what gifts we may receive, are all indubitably *present* and *real* in our lives. Such encounters, such feats of the imagination, such glimpses of our own mortality, all change us, and affect not just this or that theory, but rather the way we see the world, and the way we live our lives. What does it matter, then, if it is all a dream? Does that make it any less real?

5. On the Loving Gaze

For Aquinas, broadly speaking, there are two kinds of knowing: First, there is the kind of knowing that we can have of abstract, alien concepts—the kind of knowing that seeks fulfillment in metaphysical explanation, if you will—and second, there is the kind of knowing that we can have of those around us, those we know and love, as of our friends, our family, our acquaintances—the beloved object of knowledge whereby what we know we may properly be said to *possess* in some manner. And it is this latter kind of knowing that is active in the contemplation of God. In his interpretation of Aristotle, Aquinas was not hoping to demonstrate that the concepts with which he met in Aristotle’s works were completely and utterly in harmony with the Christian faith—and yet it was his work to employ these concepts in a manner befitting his faith in God, such that it was no longer necessary to view Aristotelian (or even more generally speaking, metaphysical) concepts as discontinuous with a religious way of life. What Aquinas is perhaps best known for, at least within the realm of theological scholarship, is his aim of bringing the Christian faith back into the realm of humanity, reality, finitude—the world as we know it—in which it properly belongs. In his attempt to bring about a kind of concordance between Aristotle’s principles of metaphysics and the Christian conception of God, Aquinas sought to illuminate the unity of the philosophical experience with the practice of his religion. What Aquinas rightly recognized as a danger that our heads

might suddenly detach from our bodies and float up into the atmosphere unbeknownst to us was the impetus of his task, the danger he sought to combat therein. In light of the distinction between philosophical discourse and philosophy as practice—philosophy as a way of life—which may be seen as at once incommensurable and inseparable, it is perhaps out of his preference for the latter, for philosophy *as practice*, that Aquinas shaped his task.

Aristotle's conception of the contemplation of the divine and Aquinas' conception of the contemplation of God are almost entirely interchangeable in translation. They converge in the concept of an act of knowing that is not for discursive thought or rational argumentation, but that is found instead in the intuitive and all-embracing gaze upon that which *is*. Where the constitutive descriptions may be identical, the attitudes in which they are respectively conceived are radically different. As the highest expression of human life and of philosophical activity, the contemplation of the divine reconceived as the contemplation of God transforms our conception of philosophy as *the love of wisdom* into the conception of philosophy as the *loving pursuit* of wisdom, and transforms availability *only to the few* into universal accessibility. But just because it is accessible to all does not mean that it is easily accessed—on the contrary, it is precisely by realizing what is properly *impossible* for us, in realizing that all things are possible in God, that we make the movement of loving contemplation. That the contemplation of God is the highest expression of human life, just as the contemplation

of the divine is for Aristotle, does not mean that it is something one can achieve solely by one's own strength, and at that only a very few, and then bask in it for eternity. Both Aristotle and Aquinas agree, I think, and we can attest to this in our own experience, that the wonder which moves us and to which we are finally moved, the wonder *that*, is found within a fleeting, transitory moment, rather than a lasting, stable state of being. On this we can all agree—the moment of wonder is elusive, and however magnanimous it may be during those fleeting moments, it does not advertise itself all about town at a cheap price. It is because of the sense that we cannot ever achieve it by means our own strength that we make such a difficult problem out of such a simple and wondrous phenomenon; if it does indeed come to us as a gift from without, how is it possible that we must not be said to *merit* it or *deserve* it in some measurable way? And yet, it is this very notion, the notion that we receive divine grace, which renders the contemplation of God available to every human being.

Perhaps it is this apparent *problem*—the problem of the distinction between earning a right and receiving a gift—that lies at the heart of Aristotle's hierarchy of knowledge, and at the heart of the idea that only after having achieved mastery over discursive thought is one able to reach perfect contemplation of the divine. And yet, this contemplation, aside from the fact that it is only available to the few and that it is not moved by love, otherwise rather closely resembles the contemplation of God in many ways. Despite the requirement that one engage in discursive thought beforehand,

Aristotle's *theoria* is not *intellectual*; it is an intuitive form of knowing, and as such, it is found in a fleeting, transitory moment, the activity of which may be described as a kind of *hovering* over the totality of all that is. In itself, it is not reason, or discursive thought, that is actively at work within this momentary hovering, but it is rather a kind of all-embracing gaze upon the whole of reality. One wonders how it is, since it is not itself intellectual by nature, that this kind of contemplation has intellectual activity as its necessary prerequisite. This *problem*, this difficulty, of the difference between earning a right and receiving a gift from without, lies at the root of our confusion, insofar as it ostensibly amounts to the difference between passively receiving something arbitrary, as of inertly absorbing it by a kind of osmosis, and actively achieving something by the force of one's desire and free will; for even if we can recognize that this form of contemplation is not itself intellectual, and seems to have as its object what lies beyond the grasp of intellect altogether, we cannot seem to let go of our need for the supremacy of reason in the activity of achieving our ends. What do we make of the fact that contemplation of the divine does not concern itself with rational explanation, and yet is somehow necessarily preceded by a chain of causal explanations, which, moreover, actually seem to contribute to one's ability to attain to it? In other words, Aristotle's claim that perfect contemplation of the divine can only be achieved by the elite brilliant few seems to stem from our tendency to resist the notion that the highest expression of human possibility lies outside of the realm of reason. But if we look closely at the idea

of divine contemplation, we may be able to detect that the prerequisite rationality in attaining to this state is only really there, in effect, in order that we may ultimately *let go* of it. In other words, it appears that it is only in *letting go* for a moment of the chain of causation and the need for rational explanation, that we may properly contemplate the divine. One might go even further to say that Aristotle's entire hierarchy of knowledge can be conceived as serving the sole purpose of getting the knower to the point of *letting go* of his knowledge, even if only for a brief moment.

But does this necessarily imply, for example, that someone who goes through the process of engaging in philosophy is only doing so in order that he might end up right back where he started?—By no means. Whether or not one has a degree in philosophy or is a professor of philosophy or is otherwise able to refer to himself as a 'professional philosopher,' none of these designations inherently contain proof that such a person has ever engaged in the true *philosophical act*. One who fully engages with the entirety of the process—whereby one runs up against the very limits of reason only to find that reason is *not all there is*—does not end up with the same kind of ignorance he had when he first undertook the rational pursuit of knowledge. Contemplation of the divine is marked by wonder; and of course, all wonder, as such, occurs in a state of ignorance. But while the ignorance with which one begins is most often presented as a problem to be resolved, a question to be removed, even as a kind of sickness to be cured, the ignorance with which one finds oneself in perfect contemplation of the divine does

not regard itself as a problem in the least—on the contrary, far from wishing to eliminate it, we are fated, once we have caught a glimpse of it, to seek it out lovingly and unconditionally for as long as we live. But this kind of wonder only seems possible as far as we find out, by and for ourselves, exactly what philosophy is and is not capable of; it is only by running up against the limits of the wonder *why* things are, that one can truly be awakened to the sublimity of the wonder *that* things are. It is precisely this tension, the tension between what we are *unable* to do by means of rational discourse, and what we are *able* to do by means of letting it go, that lies at the heart of the philosophical act. Let us remember that Wittgenstein advised all of his students *not* to pursue a life within philosophy, or at least, philosophical academia; perhaps this counsel came from a place within him which recognized the sublimity of the wonder that philosophical discourse necessarily moves away from, only in order that it may try to return to it again in a new light. But let us also remember that *not one* of those students of his, no matter how loyal or how thoughtful—*not a single one* of them took his advice, but they *all* quite unreservedly hurled themselves into the sea of rational discourse as vocational philosophers. With respect to the idea that the failure of philosophy is revealed in none other than the philosophical act, not one of us can ever take someone else's word for it that this is really the case—that philosophy resolves itself in its own futility, and that it culminates in its own destruction—without seeking this out in our own active experience.

In this way, something like Aquinas' *contemplatio*, as available to everyone, as oriented by the gift of the beatific vision, does not at all suggest that it is an easy task for everyone or a passive state of being; but where the distinction between actively acquiring and passively receiving presents itself as a *problem* for the likes of Aristotle, there is no such *problem* with respect to the contemplation of God. By virtue of being *created*, we already find ourselves immersed within the paradox of simultaneous activity and passivity, activity and receptivity. If what I call 'the philosophical act' is truly the only way in which we can actively inhabit this paradoxical circumstance of ours, then it must, according to Aquinas, be a distinct possibility for every human being, regardless of intellectual capacity or mental disposition. For him, even those of us who are not endowed with fully functioning mental capabilities are blessed with the gift of grace. And yet, somehow, this gift still requires an active reception on all our parts—it requires some kind of *work*, some kind of *act*, in response to the *act* of God. But what, if it is not in itself a rational or intellectual act, is the nature of this active movement we are called upon to make?

For Aquinas, as for Aristotle, natural reason may acquire, after a long and patient effort, the ultimate virtue of wisdom, which appears as the summit of the intellectual life. The man who possesses this virtue is thought of as a wise man. Thanks to this intellectual virtue of wisdom, he has become capable of knowing divine and eternal things as correctly judged according to a very well informed faculty of reason. But

according to Aquinas, the supernatural *gift* of wisdom acts in a very different way. It relates the wise man's soul to the divine, and at the same time *makes* the wise man's soul divine. The divine gift of wisdom does not act by adding something to the achievements of superior natural reason, but in itself it *causes* reason, in its natural pursuit of the divine, to feel as if it is *at home* therein, instinctively or intuitively sensing what is true long before taking hold of its rational demonstration. The divine gift of wisdom is what enables reason to guide the soul toward the truth man seeks in his pursuit of knowledge, and, as we have seen, is often sufficient to excuse him from such a pursuit. Again, we encounter the idea that we are helped in our understanding by that which we cannot understand, rather than the idea that we are helped to understand only by that which we already understand. What is more, the wise man contemplates the divine not only in order to know, but he also contemplates in order that he may *act*. His spiritual life, in the contemplation of God, is what connects his soul to the divine, and thus the divine gift of wisdom has not just a speculative but a highly practical value. The gift of wisdom directs not only contemplation, but action as well. The root of this kind of wisdom, then, in contrast to Aristotle's *theoria*, is less like a cognitive form of intuition than a kind of communion between human nature as knowing and the divine. But again, what is it that lies at the heart of our capacity to have this kind of kinship with God? How is it possible that we can have communion with God—that we can *speak* with God, as it were, in this kind of contemplative prayer?

In Aquinas' distinction between the love we feel for a *person* and the love we feel for a *thing*, we find that whereas we usually love a thing because of the pleasure it affords us, the advantages we receive through it, when we love a person, we love him for himself because his worthiness entitles him to our love. Thus love, pure and simple, consists in taking pleasure in *the good*. But what is the cause of love? In the first place, it is the good; nature, as the good, reveals itself in the fullest satisfaction of our natures as human beings. Added to the good, however, is that other object of love, the *beautiful*. The good and the beautiful, which are both inseparable from being *as such*, are only distinct in which part of our humanity finds rest or satisfaction therein; whereas it is the will that is at rest within the good, it is the sensible or intellectual apprehension that is at rest within the beautiful. In other words, the beautiful is that thing the very seeing and hearing of which is totally sufficient reason for seeing and hearing it. As Thomas says in the *Summa*, 'It pertains to the nature of the beautiful, that our vision of it finds in it its repose.'¹ In light of the discussion of movement as the actuality of potentiality, we must try to avoid confusing the absolute finality of this kind of apprehension with the absolute finality of knowledge; it is not necessary that knowledge come last in the order of knowing, if it is actually rather the apprehension of knowledge which comes last in the order of knowing. Just as in a *movement* we actualize a potency insofar as it is *potency*, and not *actuality*, so in our pursuit of knowledge, we find an object of

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 27, I, ad 3.

apprehension that is so perfect that, *as apprehension*, it leaves nothing to be desired. When we say of Euclid's *Elements* that it is *beautiful*, we mean that, quite apart from the hard knowledge we gain by what it actually teaches us, we find that it is an occasion for our understanding an object of apprehension, such that *the apprehension alone is beautiful*. It is not that the sight of such objects, in pleasing us, *proves* that they are beautiful, but on the contrary, the joy we feel in the face of beauty finds its cause in none other but the beauty itself. The joy we experience in the face of beauty, which is of the same kind as the beauty that causes it, is a distinct quality we all know from everyday experience. This is like a kind of radiance that envelops certain acts of knowing, and which confers upon them the very character of contemplation. The love of beauty consists in the act of apprehending an object of knowledge such that the act finds in its apprehension of the object perfect contentment and repose.

Whether it is a question of the good or the beautiful, love presupposes knowledge of the object loved. Just as the sight of a visible beauty is at the source of our natural, sensible love, so the spiritual contemplation of the beautiful or the good is at the source of our spiritual, divine love. Even so, love is never measured by knowledge; this is evident in the fact that we are able to love an object wholeheartedly without having perfect knowledge of it. It is enough that our imperfect knowledge of something offers it up to our love, for our love to take hold of it and *possess* it as though it were perfect and completely whole. Where the activity of seeking knowledge may be likened to the

act of *drinking*, the possession of the beloved by the lover may be likened to *the drink itself*. We love what we do not yet know by means of our love for what we do know; conversely, it is our love for what we do not know that enables our pursuit of further knowledge. After all, how could perfect love of God be possible if we could only love in proportion to what we know?

Thus knowledge is actually the source of love, rather than the cause of it. Knowledge is like a kind of necessary condition for love, not vice versa. But whereas the union of the knower with the thing known comes about only by means of the knower's resemblance to his object, the union of the lover with the beloved comes about such that the two become *one single thing*. The one who loves is said to *possess* what he loves insofar as what he loves is *in him*; the beloved person belongs to the loving person insofar as the former resides within the *thought* of the latter by means of knowledge. Thus of human love it can be said that it seeks to penetrate to the heart of what it loves *in thought*. And just as, in our pursuit of knowledge, we may be elevated by God to the understanding of objects that are well beyond our reach, so the lover, in meditation upon the beloved, loses himself in the act of love—he is transported outside of himself and beyond himself such that the lover desires nothing more than the good for the beloved. Thus it is that, for Aquinas, love is a universal force we find everywhere in nature, since whatever acts does so only with a view to an end, which is the good that it loves and desires; whatever action any being performs, it is moved by virtue of some

kind of love in performing it. Just as nature makes beings that are not endowed with reason act accordingly, so in making beings endowed with reason, it insists that we find out what we are so that we may act accordingly. To become *what we are* is our highest calling—to actualize the limits of possibility for the rational creatures we are. Whenever our nature moves us toward this good, love is present in some way. In creating us, God endowed us with active natures, whereby we are capable of fulfilling ourselves or realizing ourselves towards our final end. Because we are endowed with reason, we participate in the liberty of choosing the objects of our knowledge, and the objects of our love; for Aquinas, it is *charity* by which we freely choose what is eminently worthy of our love. But in acknowledging our immense and unending *debt* to God, in the revelation of divine grace, in our gratitude for the world, our love for God arises as the highest love we have, and by which we are made one with Him in perfect communion, in the fullest possible realization of our active human nature.

In other words, because it is by means of the intellect that we are made above the beast, in the image of God, we ought to move as though by means of our natural inclination toward the highest of knowable objects which our intellect can know. But while our desire for knowledge of God cannot be satisfied in itself—for we cannot achieve perfect knowledge of God—what little knowledge we *can* achieve is the occasion for our love of God to burst forth in beauty and perfection. It is divine *grace* that allows us to share in the divine with God, and thus it is grace that restores the balance that is

destroyed by confusing science with wisdom, and it is grace that gives us a new life, a life wherein we may freely give ourselves to nature without despairing at our finitude, our inevitable mortality.

To play a part in God's life, to love Him and be loved by Him, to recognize that we are of unending value in His eyes, this is the highest possible expression of our nature as human beings. Every natural movement we make is in reality the actualization of some end, a movement propelled by our deepest desires. This amounts to the same as saying that whatever moves itself or is moved, loves. As the stone falls, the flame rises, the tree grows, the animal hunts its prey, whether living or not, every being is moved finally but nothing but *love*. Because we are endowed with intellect and reason, we are capable of knowing that God exists, that He created us and has invited us to share what is good and beautiful in communion with Him. The first and most important effect of *grace*, of our active reception of the world *as gift*, is that it restores our natural love for God above all things, and directs how we see the world and all those things that reside in it with us. Since we do not love in order that we may know, but we know in order that we may love, our understanding precedes our love in time, but not in importance. In seeking knowledge of the causes, and losing ourselves along the way as we mistake rational explanation for the object of our deepest desires, it is only by reestablishing that by which we are truly moved, which is born in the love of beauty and the wonder *that* things are, as the active reception of the divine gift of wisdom, the gift of

grace, to which we are forever and always indebted in our perfect love of God—the wonder that calls upon us to realize ourselves as human beings who are ecstatically *in love* with the world.

As for Aquinas *the philosopher*, this emphasis on love is not his, but mine; many critics of his think his philosophy to have unduly affected his theology, especially so with respect to the charge against him that he makes the state of Beatitude too intellectual, conceiving it as the satisfaction of the *love of truth*, instead of the *truth of love*. But this is mostly a difference in emphasis, rather than essence, and may in the end amount to nothing more than a difference in temperament. In G.K. Chesterton's loosely biographical account of the life and work of St. Thomas, he describes him as shy, bulky, given at once to the most earthly common-sense and the highest abstractions in thought. He was anything but sentimental, and there is some considerable evidence that he was not overtly emotional in his active life, as he was not so in his contemplative life. In Chesterton's words, 'It would have embarrassed him to write about love at such length.'² With this kind of picture in mind, it is quite easy to forget that this is the same man who requested to have the *Song of Songs*, the mystical poem of love, read to him from beginning to end as he lay on his deathbed. It is strange to imagine that such a one as he, so eminently practical and exactingly rational, took comfort when he died in the giving and receiving of none other than *true love*.

² G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas; the Dumb Ox*, 113.

As for Aquinas *the man*, Aquinas as a human being, he was broad enough, deep enough, to see the whole natural order as coming from God, the creator of all things, and to see reason as a divine gift to be highly cherished. The *Summa Theologica*, his last and, perhaps more suggestively, his famously unfinished work, deals with the whole of Catholic theology; when his close friend Reginald asked him to resume his reading and writing it, he replied, 'I can write no more. I have seen things which make all my writings like straw.'³ In conjunction with this enigmatic response, which was to mark the end of a very controversial career and remain forever elusive to historical interpretation, we must also look to the following communication taken from the *Summa* itself: 'Hence we must say that for the knowledge of any truth whatsoever man needs divine help, that the intellect may be moved by God to its act. But he does not need a new light added to his natural light, in order to know the truth in all things, but only in some that surpasses his natural knowledge.' The 'new light' that is added to his 'natural light' is thus what enables us all—and what enables Aquinas in his response to the query concerning his unfinished *Summa*—to discover the truth in that which surpasses his rational understanding. It is because of this 'new light' that Aquinas was compelled to stop writing, insofar as it revealed to him the truth of what surpassed his understanding; but we must also remember that if he had not tried to write it in the first place, by means of his 'natural light,' it would not have been possible for the 'new light'

³ Ibid, 116.

to be thus *added*. His imperfect knowledge of God was a necessary precursor to his perfect love of God, so that it was in light of his limitations—against the backdrop of his ineptitude and his finitude in death—that he was given the divine gift of wisdom, the grace whereby his finitude was transcended in the infinite, and in which his humanity was transcended in God.

Likewise perhaps it is only by means of actively engaging in the struggle against our human limitations—the struggle in which our abilities inevitably fall short of our desires—that we may ever hope to burst forth in limitless love and limitless possibility. It is always against the backdrop of our finitude that we necessarily find ourselves at one with the infinite, and it is always in light of our failing to achieve what we desire in seeking knowledge that we are able to realize our ability to succeed in finding perfect love. It is only within this tension between what we cannot do and what we can do, between the thought that everything could have been different than it is and the realization that everything *is just as it is*, that we can ever hope to recognize the world as gift, whereby what is fragile is made strong, and what is painful is made beautiful. Thus when philosophy and poetry are united in the philosophical act, when we actively and simultaneously inhabit both our powerlessness and our power, our fragility and our strength, our suffering and our joy, we are rendered *silent* by the great mystery of being. It is thus in our silence that we express ourselves most perfectly as human beings, that we best express our gratitude for the world in which we live. The silent wonder of the

philosophical act is the silence of humanity in the face of beauty and death, joy and pain; it is only in silence that we may gaze upon all that *is* with perfect love and with perfect gratitude—and it is only in silence that we may ever hope to *live* the loving gaze. As I recognize here that which I cannot do, I must recognize that which I *can* do. In this moment of my silence, I resign myself to the impossibility of finitude, and I accept with an open heart the gift of possibility in God. Thus my essay ends in silence.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Trans. Joe Sachs. Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 1999.
- . *Physics*. Trans. Joe Sachs. New Brunswick and London, UK: Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- Chesterton, G.K. *Orthodoxy*. Orlando, FL: Relevant Books, 2006.
- Kerr, Fergus. *“Work on Oneself”: Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Psychology*. Arlington, VA: The Institute for Psychological Sciences Press, 2008.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling, Dialectical Lyric*. Trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Pieper, Josef. *Happiness and Contemplation*. Trans. Richard and Clara Winston. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998.
- Sachs, Joe. *Aristotle’s Physics: A Guided Study*. Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 1995.
- . *Aristotle: Motion and its Place in Nature*. James Fieser, founder and ed. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005. (accessed March 15, 2011.)
- Stevens, Wallace. *“Sunday Morning.” Harmonium*. 1923. London, UK: St. James Press, 1975.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. Trans. Ian Dreiblatt. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2008.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value*. G.H. von Wright, ed. Trans. Peter Winch. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- . *Philosophical Investigations*. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, eds. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd, 2009.