

the words: "Wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder."<sup>3</sup> So too Aristotle, echoing his former teacher, declares in Book One of the *Metaphysics*, that: "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize."<sup>4</sup> Commenting on these two passages in Plato and Aristotle, Martin Heidegger wrote in *What is Philosophy?*:

Astonishment, as πάθος, is the ἀρχή [the beginning] of philosophy. We must understand the Greek word ἀρχή in its fullest sense. It names that from which something proceeds. But this "from where" is not left behind in the process of going out, but the beginning rather becomes that which the verb ἄρχειν expresses, that which governs. The πάθος of astonishment thus does not simply stand at the beginning of philosophy, as, for example, the washing of his hands precedes the surgeon's operation. Astonishment carries and pervades philosophy. . . . It would be very superficial and, above all, very un-Greek, if we would believe that Plato and Aristotle are only determining here that astonishment is the cause of philosophizing. If they were of this opinion, that would mean that at some time or other men were astonished especially about being and that it is and what it is. Impelled by this astonishment, they began to philosophize. As soon as philosophy was in progress, astonishment became superfluous as a propelling force so that it disappeared. It could disappear since it was only an impetus. However, astonishment is ἀρχή—it pervades every step of philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

So too, at the dawn of the twentieth century, we find Albert Einstein, the father of relativity physics, saying to his admirers: "He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead; his eyes are closed."<sup>6</sup> And finally, there is this from British author and poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge: "In wonder all philosophy began, in wonder it ends, and admiration

3. *Theaetetus* 155d (trans. Benjamin Jowett).

4. *Metaphysics* 982b12 (trans. W. D. Ross).

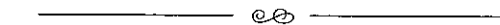
5. See Martin Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Jean T. Wilde and William Kluback (New Haven: College and University Press, 1958), paragraphs 46, 48.

6. Quoted in G. T. W. Patrick and F. M. Chapman, *Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1935), 44.

## "IF PHILOSOPHY BEGINS IN WONDER": AQUINAS, CREATION, AND WONDER

RANDALL B. SMITH

"[A]ll of created reality is an embodiment of God's love, thus all of created reality should be seen as a *sacrament*—that is, as an instrument of God's grace."



Philosophy begins in wonder. And, at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains.

So said Alfred North Whitehead, one of the leading lights of contemporary philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Now in claiming that "philosophy begins in wonder," Whitehead, the man who had famously claimed that Western philosophy could best be characterized as "a series of footnotes to Plato,"<sup>2</sup> was himself in this instance merely echoing Plato, who had centuries earlier put into the mouth of his hero Socrates

1. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1938), 168.

2. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, The Gifford Lectures, 1927–28 (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 39.

fills up the interspace; but the first wonder is the offspring of ignorance, the last is the parent of adoration.”<sup>7</sup> More on this last comment in due course. But suffice it to say for the moment that the list of thinkers who have authored praises of the wondrous quality of wonder would fill page after page.

And so, we might ask: If it is true that “philosophy begins in wonder,” then how might we best nurture and sustain wonder, especially among the young? What, for example, are the sorts of dispositions, practices, and worldviews that give birth to wonder, and thus pave the way for science and philosophy, as opposed to those that diminish and destroy it? If Heidegger is right that wonder should pervade every step of philosophy as its ἀρχή, and if Alfred North Whitehead is right that “when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains,” then we might also rightly ask which methods of *doing* philosophy and science foster and sustain wonder, rather than diminishing or destroying it. For it would seem on this account that methods of doing philosophy or natural science that result in the diminishment or destruction of wonder are destroying not only the principle that gives them birth, but the spirit that animates them as well.

In what follows, I will outline why I believe that the authentic Christian sacramental theology of creation—especially as it was enunciated and clarified by Thomas Aquinas’s Aristotelian metaphysics of creation—provides the sort of pre-philosophical worldview that can nourish, *and as importantly, continue to sustain*, the wonder necessary to philosophy. It is superior in this regard, I will suggest, either to the reductivist spiritualism of the ancients or the reductivist materialism of the moderns.

#### “MAN HAS NATURE WHACKED”: IMPRISONING NATURE WITHIN MODERNITY’S “PANOPTICON”

Now admittedly not all philosophers have had an equally appreciative view of wonder. “Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy, inquiry the progress, ignorance the end,” declared that

7. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 6th ed. (New York: Stanford & Swords, 1847), 177, aphorism IV.

crabby sixteenth-century French cynic Montaigne.<sup>8</sup> Spinoza too seems to have downplayed the role of wonder in natural science, describing it as more of a stalling of the mind when it comes upon a question it cannot yet answer.<sup>9</sup>

Thus here, at the very wellsprings of modernity, there is, I would suggest, a somewhat changed attitude toward wonder: it is increasingly viewed the way God is viewed by the deists. Wonder is something needed to get the mechanism of science going. But once the mechanism is up and running, the Prime Mover is best left aside. Just as the clockmaker God cannot be allowed to enter back into the mechanism of his creation, neither can wonder be allowed to stall us in knowledge’s continual forward progress toward eventual mastery over the mechanism. Wonder is now merely a puzzle to be solved, a problem to be fixed, an embarrassing pause in humanity’s perpetual march of progress toward the ultimate plundering of nature’s secrets and control of her powers.

Modernity’s project of plundering nature’s secrets is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in Abraham Cowley’s magnificent poem in praise of the sixteenth-century British physician Dr. William Harvey, the man who was the first to describe correctly and in detail the circulatory system. Cowley’s poem is one of those marvels of late Renaissance art that combines the sensibilities of modernity with imagery from classical antiquity: in this case, the myth of Daphne and Apollo. It was Daphne, the beautiful virgin nymph who, while fleeing the erotic pursuits of the god Apollo, prayed to her father, the river god Peneus, to save her from Apollo’s embrace. And so, just as Apollo was about to take her, Daphne was changed into a tree, leaving Apollo standing amazed and unsatisfied. Harvey, “our Apollo” as Cowley calls him, is not left similarly unsatisfied:

Coy Nature, [writes Cowley] (which remain’d, though  
aged grown,  
A Beauteous virgin still, enjoy’d by none,  
Nor seen unveil’d by any one)  
When Harvey’s violent passion she did see,

8. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), III. 11, p. 788.

9. Cf. Spinoza, *Ethics* III, def. IV.

Began to tremble, and to flee,  
 Took Sanctuary like Daphne in a tree:  
 There Daphne's lover stop't, and thought it much  
     The very Leaves of her to touch,  
 But Harvey our Apollo, stop't not so,  
 Into the Bark, and root he after her did goe:  
     No smallest Fibres of a Plant,  
 For which the eiebeams Point doth sharpness want,  
     His passage after her withstood.  
 What should she do? through all the moving wood  
 Of Lives indow'd with sense she took her flight,  
 Harvey persues, and keeps her still in sight.  
 But as the Deer long-hunted takes a flood,  
 She leapt at last into the winding streams of blood;  
 Of mans Meander all the Purple reaches made,  
     Till at the heart she stay'd,  
     Where turning head, and at a Bay,  
 Thus, by well-purged ears, was she o're-heard to say.

Here sure shall I be safe (said she)  
 None will be able sure to see  
     This my retreat, but only He  
     Who made both it and me.  
 The heart of Man, what Art can e're reveal?  
     A wall impervious between  
     Divides the very Parts within,  
 And doth the Heart of man ev'n from its self conceal.  
     She spoke, but e're she was aware,  
     Harvey was with her there,  
 And held this slippery Proteus in a chain,  
 Till all her mighty Mysteries she descry'd,  
 Which from his wit the attempt before to hide  
 Was the first Thing that Nature did in vain.<sup>10</sup>

This, to put not too fine a point on it, is the story of a rape. Harvey has not only "got Mother Nature on the run" (as the rock musician Neil Young once wrote), he's got this "coy" and "beauteous virgin" chained down and stripped naked, revealing to him her most intimate secrets. Her resistance has been "in vain," Cowley tells us, as nature's "coyness" has been rudely forced to give way to Harvey's "violent passion"—a passion that, while it may have begun in wonder at nature's "virgin

10. Abraham Cowley, "Upon Dr. Harvey," stanzas 1–2, <http://cowley.lib.virginia.edu/works/drharvey.htm>.

beauty," has ended in something altogether different.

The overall tenor of the poem suggests something C. S. Lewis reports in *The Abolition of Man* as having heard from a friend, namely that "man has nature whacked." "In their context the words had a certain tragic beauty," Lewis tells us, for at the time "the speaker was dying of tuberculosis."<sup>11</sup> In Cowley's poem too, there is a tragic irony; Harvey, as it turns out, is dead.

And Nature now, so long by him surpass't,  
 Will sure have her revenge on him at last.<sup>12</sup>

Having been raped, this is perhaps nature's final recourse: to kill her assailant in revenge. And of course if mankind could succeed in what Leon Kass has called mankind's "immortality project,"<sup>13</sup> then nature would be denied even this small consolation. Man's "conquest" of nature, as it is so often described, would, it seems, be complete, his dominance unchallenged. But would he really be better off? Is the deflowering of nature really the necessary means to human flourishing?

I think not. But how can it be avoided? There is simply no getting around the brute fact that, as author Wendell Berry points out, the universe is "somewhat hospitable to us, but it is [also] absolutely dangerous to us (it is going to kill us sooner or later)."<sup>14</sup> And yet, "To use or not use nature," says Berry, "is not a choice that is available to us"; "we are absolutely dependent on it."<sup>15</sup> Our lives depend upon the death of other things. There is thus reason enough, certainly, to imagine that we are "at war" with nature, and that our ultimate survival depends upon our gaining the upper hand. Hasn't it always been thus?

11. See C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001; orig. 1947), 53.

12. Cowley, "Upon Dr. Harvey," final two lines.

13. Cf., for example, the discussion in: Leon Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Human Dignity: The Challenge of Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002).

14. Cf. Wendell Berry, "Preserving Wildness," in *Home Economics: Fourteen Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1987), 137–51.

15. *Ibid.*

GENESIS MYTHS AND THE WAR BETWEEN  
MAN AND NATURE

It has always been true that many human beings—indeed, perhaps most—have seen themselves as condemned by fate to a constant struggle for survival against the inimical forces of nature. Such a view of the world and the place of human beings in it was expressed by ancient myths such as the great Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma Elish*, in which the Babylonian hero-god Marduk goes out to do battle with his mother, Tiamat, the goddess of chaos. Cutting her in half, he fashions the universe from her body. And from the blood of her slain consort, the dragon-god, Kingu, he creates human beings.<sup>16</sup> It is, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger points out in his book *'In the Beginning . . .': A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*: “A foreboding picture of the world and of humankind that we encounter here. The world is a dragon’s body and human beings have dragon’s blood in them. At the very origin of the world lurks something sinister, and in the deepest part of humankind there lies something rebellious, demonic, and evil.”<sup>17</sup> “Such views were not simply fairy tales,” says Ratzinger. “They expressed the discomfiting realities that human beings experienced in the world and among themselves. For often enough it looks as if the world is a dragon’s lair and human blood is dragon’s blood.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed often enough, does it not seem, even to us, as though the world is mostly a battle against chaos, and that man’s lot in life is “kill or be killed,” “survival of the fittest”?

Clearly it does. And yet, despite all obvious evidence to the contrary, the biblical account of creation in Genesis 1 paints a very different picture of the world. The world is not a battle against chaos, nor is man’s life drawn up out of blood. Rather, the world, suggests the author of Genesis 1, is a gift of God’s wisdom and love, and man, to whom the world is given

16. Cf., for example, the convenient summary and text of the epic in: Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), 1ff.

17. Joseph Ratzinger, *'In the Beginning . . .': A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 12.

18. *Ibid.*, 13.

as a gift to be held in trust, is said to be made “in the image of God” himself.

It is for this reason, says Ratzinger, that the Genesis story of creation should be seen as a “breakthrough out of the fears that had oppressed humankind” and indeed as “the decisive ‘enlightenment’ of history.”<sup>19</sup> Here we see Ratzinger’s sly playfulness, for he knows full well that the other, more well-known “Enlightenment” was based on the rejection of God precisely because the superstitious idea of God was thought to have oppressed humankind. But for Ratzinger, the creation story in Genesis is the *true* enlightenment of history because “it put human reason firmly on the primordial basis of God’s creating Reason, in order to establish it in truth and in love.”<sup>20</sup> “Here we see [both] the audacity and the temperateness of the faith,” says Ratzinger—a faith that, “in confronting the pagan myths, made the light of truth appear by showing that the world was not a demonic contest but that it arose from God’s Reason and reposes on God’s Word.”<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, he warns us that an “enlightenment” that based itself on a notion of human reason totally divorced from its primordial basis in God’s creating Reason would be “exorbitant and ultimately foolish.”<sup>22</sup> Abraham Cowley’s praise of Dr. Harvey, I would suggest, gives us an intimation of why. When humankind starts out with a reason divorced from any relationship to the ultimate meaning of things or of their ultimate good, they end up with a science that studies nature by tying her down and torturing her until she gives up her secrets. They end up with the rape of nature and of the environment. They end up believing that the point isn’t to understand the world, but to change it, and then they forget to ask: Change it *to* what? For what reason? Under the guidance of what fundamental moral principles? With our appetites under the discipline of which virtues? And when that happens, then the world ceases to be seen as a gift held in trust, and as the philosopher Nietzsche well understood, becomes rather an arena for the exercise of man’s never-ending will-to-power.

19. *Ibid.*, 14.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

"Is it, then, possible," asks C. S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*, "to imagine a new natural philosophy"—one that, "When it explained it would not explain away. When it spoke of the parts it would remember the whole. While studying the *It*, it would not lose what Martin Buber calls the *Thou*-situation."<sup>23</sup> Is there, in other words, another way of *thinking about* the world—one that sees the world as more than merely *material* for our use or enjoyment, and yet will not devalue the world by rendering material things uninteresting or unimportant. I suggest there is, for this is precisely what St. Thomas Aquinas's Christian metaphysics of creation can supply.

Let us briefly examine how.

#### THOMAS AQUINAS'S CHRISTIAN METAPHYSICS OF CREATION (I): CREATION AND BEING

First it is important to understand that for Thomas Aquinas, "creation" is not merely a single event that happened at some distant point in time. Unlike for the deists, for whom God is a divine clockmaker who, once he has constructed the universal machine and gotten it running, can go off and fall asleep or die, Aquinas's Creator-God is the *complete and continual causing of the Being of whatever exists for as long as it exists*. God, on this view, "creates" not by using some preexisting material out of which he fashions the universe, such as a clockmaker who uses pre-existing metal and wood and glass out of which he fashions the clock. No, God creates, as we say, "out of *nothing*." He creates, says Thomas, by imparting *Being*.

In his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, in response to the question of "whether things come from the one principle by way of creation," Thomas answers:

It ought to be known . . . that the meaning of creation includes two things. The first is that it presupposes nothing in the thing which is said to be created. In this way it differs from other changes, because a generation presupposes matter, which is not generated, but rather which is transformed and brought to completion through

23. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 78–79.

generation. In other changes a subject which is a complete being is presupposed. Hence the causality of the generator or of the alterer does not extend to everything which is found in the thing, but only to the form, which is brought from potency into actuality. The causality of the Creator, however, extends to everything that is in the thing. And therefore, creation is said to be out of *nothing*, because nothing uncreated pre-exists creation.<sup>24</sup>

An old joke has it that the devil once challenged God to a baking contest. God, going first, took eggs, milk, sugar, and butter and made a wonderful, but modest, little cake. The devil took one look at God's modest creation and declared with contempt, "I can do *much* better than that," putting forth his hands to grasp the eggs, milk, sugar, and butter to begin his baking. At which point, God said calmly: "No, no; make your own ingredients." In his pride and foolishness, the devil had forgotten who was responsible for the eggs, butter, sugar, and milk—who it is who *gives them Being*; who it is who makes things *exist* rather than *not exist*.

Like the foolish devil, we too often take the existence of the universe for granted. We think that, once created, the universe exists on its own and runs by itself, entirely apart from God. As Aquinas would tell us, however, such a conclusion is the result not only of a fundamentally pagan view of creation, but also of a rudimentary and undeveloped metaphysics.

It is a fundamentally *pagan* view of creation in that it envisions the creative act in terms of a god or gods taking some preexisting, primordial "stuff" and "forming" it into the world as we know it. In the Babylonian myth of *Enuma Elish*, for ex-

24. For the English text, see *Aquinas on Creation: Writings on the "Sentences" of Peter Lombard*, bk. 2, dist. 1, q. 1, art. 2, trans. with an introduction and notes by Steven Baldner and William Carroll (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies Press, 1997), 74. This is still the most valuable book on the topic, with an excellent short introduction to the topic of creation from the patristic Fathers to the medieval contemporaries of Aquinas. Prof. Carroll has subsequently done a number of important essays on the topic as well. For a nice introduction, see his essay "Aquinas and the Big Bang" in the journal *First Things* 97 (November 1999): 18–20; and "Cosmology and Creation," *Logos* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 134–49. The current essay is in many ways merely an attempt to apply the insights of Carroll and Baldner's work to the question with which I began: namely, how to do philosophy in such a way as to preserve wonder.

ample, Marduk uses the body of his mother-goddess Tiamat to fashion the heavens and the earth. In the Genesis creation story, by contrast, God creates “from nothing”: there is no primordial “stuff” out of which God makes the universe.

Our language will sometimes betray us in such matters when we are speaking loosely. So, for example, if I were a carpenter, I might say something like this: “I made this bench.” But of course, by “making” here, I mean no more than that I took some pre-existing “stuff”—in this case, wood—and re-fashioned it into a bench. And it is precisely because the bench has been made out of some independently existing “stuff” that the bench can go on existing long after I have died.

“Creation,” on the other hand, for Thomas Aquinas, must be understood *metaphysically* as the *complete and continual causing of the Being of whatever exists for as long as it exists*. To be the complete cause of something’s very existence is not to work on or alter some already existing “material.” If there were a prior “something” that was used in the act of producing the thing, then the agent doing the producing would not be the *complete* cause of the new being. God not only puts together the ingredients and bakes the cake (so to speak), he makes the ingredients to be; he makes heat to be; indeed, he makes the laws of physics by which the cake is “baked” to be.

Creation, on this view, is not exclusively some distant event that happens once; it is the *continual* causing of the very being of whatever exists for as long as it continues to exist. If God were not creating the universe *right now*, at this very moment, then it would not exist. That was true ten minutes ago, ten years ago, ten millions years ago; and the same will be true ten million years from now—for as long as the universe continues to exist rather than not exist. “If the sun and moon should doubt,” wrote the poet William Blake, “they’d immediately go out.”<sup>25</sup> Something similar might be said about the Creator. If for a moment God were to “lose his concentration” (to speak in a limited human fashion), then those things that he is “creating”—that is to say, those things that he is making exist rather than not exist—would cease to exist.

25. William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence,” lines 107–08, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172906>.

Modern theologians, having been warned by Pascal that they must distinguish between “the God of the philosophers” and “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,”<sup>26</sup> have sadly often failed to see the true importance of Thomas’s philosophy of creation and the God-Creator of *being* it envisions. For what Thomas’s metaphysics of creation teaches us is the radical truth of the biblical saying that every hair on our heads is numbered (cf. Mt 10:30 and Lk 12:7). Were God not involved in our very *being* at each and every moment, then we would cease to exist entirely. There is, indeed, in the universe no atom from which God’s continual, deeply intimate attention could possibly be absent.

#### THOMAS AQUINAS’S CHRISTIAN METAPHYSICS OF CREATION (II): DIVINE CREATION AND NATURAL CAUSALITY

What Thomas’s metaphysics of creation does as well is to affirm for us the importance of the particular material things in the universe and their properties. Far from it being the case that “material reality” represents some sort of “lesser form of existence”—something fundamentally illusory to be “risen above” on our mind’s way up to the Eternal Forms (such as is the case in the metaphysics of Plato)—for Aquinas, when God causes something to exist, it truly does exist. Not partially, or in an illusory way, but really.

And since, on this view, created things do have their own being—even though at every moment, they depend on God “creating” them—they are able to act as true causes in the universe. Thus, on this view, we need not, and indeed *must not*, according to Thomas, oppose the laws of nature with God’s divine causality. Thus we find Thomas arguing in the first part of his *Summa Theologiae* that:

26. On this, cf. Pascal’s so-called “Memorial,” which he carried with him in the lining of his coat, and which he transferred to each new coat he wore; it read, in part: “DIEU d’Abraham, DIEU d’Isaac, DIEU de Jacob, non des philosophes et des savants” (“GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned”). The note was dated very specifically: The year of grace 1654, Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology. Vigil of St. Chrysogonus, martyr, and others. From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight.” The note ends: “May I not forget your words. Amen.”

Some have understood God to work in every agent in such a way that no created power has any effect in things, but that God alone is the ultimate cause of everything wrought; for instance, that it is not fire that gives heat, but God in the fire, and so forth. But this is impossible. First, because the order of cause and effect would be taken away from created things, and this would imply lack of power in the Creator, for it is due to the power of the cause, that it bestows active power on its effect. Secondly, because the active powers which are seen to exist in things, would be bestowed on things to no purpose, if these wrought nothing through them. Indeed, all things created would seem, in a way, to be purposeless, if they lacked an operation proper to them, since the purpose of everything is its operation. . . . We must therefore understand that God works in things in such a manner that things have their proper operation.<sup>27</sup>

Note that Thomas's argument differs radically from those of certain contemporary "design" theorists who argue that God's existence can be proven from the things in nature whose "design" purportedly cannot be accounted for by natural explanations alone. Far from looking for God in the "gaps" of natural causality, Thomas Aquinas would argue that the fact that things exist and act in their own right is the *best* proof available that God exists and is acting in them and through them. For without God continually creating them, things would not exist at all. It is a mistake to imagine that, if the natural laws of physics are involved, somehow God can't be. To make this mistake would be not only to misunderstand the eternal role of a Creator as one who continually imparts *being*, but also to neglect God's providential control over all creation—not merely over those effects for which we can find "gaps" in natural causality. The Creator of *being* Thomas envisions is entirely capable of working "supernaturally" (that is to say, "metaphysically") through natural processes.

In this regard, there is another old joke that tells the story of a man in a flood who prays for God to save him. After a while, a boat comes by the man's house, and the rescuer in the boat calls out: "Get in; the water is still rising." "No, no," says the man in the house. "I have prayed, and I trust that God

27. ST I, q. 105, a. 5.

will save me." After a while, the water rises, another boat comes by, and the man is now on the second floor of his house. "Get in," says the rescuer in the boat; "the water is still rising." "No, no," says the man. "I have prayed, and I trust that God will save me." Finally, the man is stuck on the roof of his house, and the water is at his knees. At that moment, a helicopter comes by and throws down a rope. "No, no," the man calls out. "I have prayed, and I trust that God will save me." Shortly thereafter, the water overwhelms the man, and he drowns. When he appears before the Judgment Seat of the Almighty, the man asks: "Lord, I had faith, I prayed; why didn't you save me?" To which the Lord replies: "I sent you two boats and a helicopter; what else do you want?"

Thomas Aquinas would not have made the same mistake of thinking that, if the natural laws of physics are involved, somehow God can't be. Nor would he be tempted, as some people seem to be, to refuse medical treatment for themselves or their children on the mistaken notion that if medicine cures the disease, then God didn't. Thomas would understand, rather, that the fact that the medicine exists and is able to act in its own right is a sure proof that the Creator exists and is continuing to create, acting in and through his creation. "Grace does not violate nature, but perfects it," Thomas would say, repeating a medieval dictum that was proverbial even in his day.<sup>28</sup>

Note as well that, on this view of things, whatever the natural sciences discover simply reveals to us how God wondrously expresses himself in and through the universe. Far from it being the case, therefore, that scientists who are Christians might be tempted to "fudge" the data of science, scientists who are Christians and who understand their faith would *never* fudge their data, any more than they would purposely misread the words of Scripture, because scientists who understand their faith would be convinced that the Book of Nature, like the Book of Scripture, were both written by the hand of God himself.

28. Thomas uses the phrase "grace does not violate nature, but perfects it" (*gratia non tollat naturam, sed perficiat*) in many places and contexts. One exemplary place can be found in ST I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2 where the question is whether "sacred doctrine makes use even of human reason." The answer, as might be expected, is yes.

NOTES TOWARD A "SACRAMENTAL"  
NOTION OF CREATION

People sometimes mistake Christianity for a mostly "spiritual" religion; indeed, even many Christians do. But Christianity is a distinctly "fleshy" religion: It affirms the goodness of creation (indeed, that all of creation is "good, very good"); it bases itself on the doctrine of the "Incarnation," the "Word made flesh"; and puts all its hope in the resurrection of the body, which, if it is not true, says St. Paul, would make Christians "the most wretched of all people" (cf. 1 Cor 15:19). Christianity is fundamentally *incarnational*, and its view of creation is essentially *sacramental*. Christianity neither reduces the spiritual to an epiphenomenon of the material, as do some modern materialists, nor does it reduce the material to an illusory precursor to the spiritual, as do some Platonists. The book of Genesis tells us, rather, if we understand it correctly, that all of created reality is an embodiment of God's love, thus all of created reality should be seen as a *sacrament*—that is, as an instrument of God's grace. To devalue the material would be as foolish as thinking one can fully appreciate God's revelation while ignoring the words of Scripture. Both should be understood as *signs* meant to point us to the Author of All Things.

And yet, by the same token, it is the proper character of *signs* to point beyond themselves. Thus for one's gaze to rest only on the material, and not to see it as fundamentally a gift of God's love, would also be a mistake. It would be like looking at letters on a page but ignoring the love note the letters spell out. Worse yet, it would be like imagining there is nothing more to a person than his or her body. Men are accustomed to making this mistake all the time. Thus you will often hear beautiful women complain that: "I don't want to be loved *just for my body*." Undoubtedly true, but by the same token, one can't really imagine a woman being comforted by an amorous admirer declaring: "You know, I love you *in spite of* your body. I care only for your spirit. I have safely gotten to the point where I can happily ignore your body altogether." This sort of comment is generally considered a bad idea.

The seventeenth-century poet William Cartwright counsels readers in his poem "No Platonic Love" against a certain "spiritualized" notion of love:

Tell me no more of minds embracing minds,  
And hearts exchange'd for hearts;  
That spirits spirits meet, as winds do winds,  
And mix their subt'lest parts;  
That two unbodied essences may kiss,  
And then like Angels, twist and feel one Bliss.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever such people *say*, claims Cartwright, the reality is quite different:

I know they boast they souls to souls convey,  
but "Howe'r they meet, the body is the way."<sup>30</sup>

John Paul II too in our own day struggled throughout his long pontificate to make clear by means of his "theology of the body" that we meet and enter into communion with others always in and through the *body*, and thus we must never take this dimension of our humanness for granted.

And yet, by the same token, it would be a mistake to stop *there*, with the body alone, and say: "Well, now that I am enjoying her body, why should I look for anything else? Why would I be interested, for example, in that thing some people call 'personality'?" From a radically materialist point of view, of course, there is nothing else *but* the body, in which case one would be well justified in stopping there. But oddly enough, this still doesn't seem to be good advice for dating. Many people, even materialists, still want to be loved *as a person*—as both a body and a soul, or better yet, as an *embodied* spirit.

When the lover loves the beloved, he loves his beloved's eyes *precisely because they are her eyes*. He loves her hair *because it is hers*. He can even come to love her weird laugh or her oddly shaped thumbs because they are hers. She cannot be reduced to any one part, and yet there is not a part that is hers that doesn't fill him with wonder. Not every day, of course. Minds and spirits wander. Sometimes people are just busy or hungry or tired. But there are those moments—and they are blessed moments indeed—when one is fully conscious of the world, and one can

29. William Cartwright, "No Platonic Love," lines 1–6, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/180692>.

30. *Ibid.*, lines 17–18.



actually *see* the beloved, not merely as another problem to be solved or issue to be resolved, but as a person—indeed, the person one loves. And in that seeing, there is both wonder and joy. “The reason for joy,” writes the German Thomist Josef Pieper, “although it may be encountered in a thousand concrete forms, is always the same: possessing or receiving what one loves. . . . Joy is the response of a lover receiving what he loves.”<sup>31</sup>

The Christian theology of creation calls upon us to see the world in this way: not stopping at the “flesh” or “body” of creation, but seeing these as revelatory of a person. And by loving that person, we more fully love all the various and sundry manifestations of his embodied presence in the world. And so, just as we can come to understand why a poet and a lover may go on and on about what, to others, might seem the most absurd and particular details about the color of his beloved’s eyes or the way she caresses things with her hands, so too we can perhaps come to understand why a naturalist becomes absolutely fascinated with cataloguing all the different kinds of disgusting bugs in the jungle or the way a geologist takes wonder in collecting what to others are just a bunch of ugly rocks. The reason is that “Joy is the response of the lover receiving what he loves.”

It is when the person interested in bugs starts to light them on fire with a magnifying glass just to see what happens, or when the collector of rocks seems less interested in all the fascinating details about rocks than in finding out how to turn lead rocks into gold ones, or how to turn uranium rocks into a bomb powerful enough to destroy millions of people, that we should begin to worry. These aren’t the responses of the lover in the presence of the beloved; they are the assaults of the marauder on what is to be plundered. Plunder can certainly give one a sense of accomplishment, but not joy. And as for wonder, once the woman has been possessed and her mysteries unveiled, the bloom is off the rose. It is time to move on: to the next challenge, the next conquest. When we no longer understand the world as something to be loved, we begin to see it more and more as merely a “resource” with which we will seek more fully to express our own will to power.

31. Josef Pieper, *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999), 20, 22.

“Man has loved the world,” writes Orthodox theologian Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, “but as an end in itself and not as transparent to God. He has done it so consistently that it . . . seems natural for [him] to experience the world as opaque, and not shot through with the presence of God. It seems natural not to live a life of thanksgiving for God’s gift of a world. It seems natural not to be eucharistic.”<sup>32</sup>

“The natural dependence of man upon the world,” says Schmemmann,

was intended to be transformed constantly into communion with God in whom is all life. Man was to be the priest of a eucharist, offering the world to God, and in this offering he was to receive the gift of life. But in the fallen world . . . [man’s] dependence on the world becomes a closed circuit, and his love is deviated from its true direction. . . . He knows he is dependent on that which is beyond him. But his love and his dependence refer only to the world in itself. He does not know that breathing can be communion with God. He does not realize that to eat can be to receive life from God in more than its physical sense. He forgets that the world, its air or its food cannot by themselves bring life, but only as they are received and accepted for God’s sake, in God and as bearers of the divine gift of life. By themselves they can produce only the appearance of life. . . . When we see the world as an end in itself, . . . [it] loses all value, because . . . the world is meaningful only when it is the “sacrament” of God’s presence.

Thus the real tragedy of human life, “the only real fall of man,” says Schmemmann, is living “a noneucharistic life in a noneucharistic world.”<sup>33</sup>

#### BEGINNING AND ENDING IN WONDER

Thus while there continues to be great wisdom, I would suggest, in Alfred North Whitehead’s dictum that “Philosophy begins in wonder,” and that, “at the end, when philosophic thought has

32. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 2nd ed. (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 16.

33. *Ibid.*, 17.

done its best, the wonder remains"; yet there is, I believe, even more wisdom in Coleridge's admonition that: "In wonder all philosophy began, in wonder it ends . . . but [while] the first is the offspring of ignorance, the last is the parent of *adoration*."<sup>34</sup> Philosophy that begins in wonder will end either in adoration born of love, or it will end in abuse born of contempt. Christian theology invites us to understand our hunger for knowledge within the context of the first; modernity, sadly, has too often caused us to give way to the second.

Thomas Aquinas's metaphysical, sacramental theology of creation offers us a way of preserving our wonder at the world while continuing the many wondrous explorations begun by modern science. Recovering the full truth of Thomas's metaphysical vision of reality offers us, I believe, a way of engaging the project the late Pope John Paul II entrusted to Catholics in

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34. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 177, aphorism IV. One thinks also in this regard of Josef Pieper's comment in *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* that: "Separated from the sphere of divine worship, and from the power it radiates, leisure is as impossible as the celebration of a feast. Cut off from the worship of the divine, leisure becomes laziness and work inhuman" (Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru [New York: Random House, 1952, 1963], 59). So too in *In Tune with the World*, shortly after the quotation mentioned above to the effect that "Joy is the response of a lover receiving what he loves," we find Pieper saying this: "True as it is that a real festival cannot be conceived without joy, it is no less true that first there must be a substantial reason for joy" (22). And further on, noting that although there are festivals celebrating specific events such as birth and marriage, he asks: "On what grounds does a specific event become the occasion for festival and celebration? Can we festively celebrate the birth of a child if we hold with Jean Paul Sartre's dictum: 'It is absurd that we are born?' Anyone who is seriously convinced that 'our whole existence is something that would be better not being,' and that consequently life is not worth living, can no more celebrate the birth of a child [or a new star or galaxy] than any other birthday" (25).

Ratzinger tells the story in *In the Beginning* of a young man who, upon being scolded by an elder that he should be grateful to his parents for his life because "he owed it to them that he was alive," replied: "I'm not at all grateful for that!" (*In the Beginning*, 53). "Underlying all festive joy kindled by a specific circumstance," claims Pieper, "there has to be an absolutely universal affirmation extending to the world as a whole, to the reality of things and the existence of man himself. . . . By ultimate foundation I mean the conviction that the prime festive occasion, which alone can ultimately justify all celebration, really exists; that, to reduce it to the most concise phrase, at bottom *everything that is, is good, and it is good to exist*. For man cannot have the experience of receiving what is loved unless the world and existence as a whole represent something good and therefore beloved to him" (*In Tune with the World*, 26).

his encyclical *Fides et ratio* of *recovering the sapiential dimension of philosophy* and restoring its *genuinely metaphysical range*.<sup>35</sup> Thomas's vision of the relationship between natural philosophy, metaphysics, and Christian faith offers us, moreover, an approach to science that, as C. S. Lewis hoped: "When it explained, would not explain away. When it spoke of the parts, would remember the whole. While studying the *It*, would not lose what Martin Buber calls the *Thou*-situation."<sup>36</sup> This is because Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics of creation allows us, while studying with absolute fascination each of the parts without diminishing their particular beauty and importance, never to lose sight of the divine *Thou* whose creative wisdom surpasses all our expectations and whose infinite love for all of his creation makes our lives and our studies not only possible, but *meaningful*. This is the way to begin philosophy in wonder that ends in joy: "the response of the lover receiving what he loves."<sup>37</sup> That is why he rightly continues to be called "the common doctor of the Church" and the patron saint of philosophers, the finest student of St. Albert the Great, patron of the natural sciences. □

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35. See esp. *Fides et ratio*, 81–83.

36. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 79.

37. Pieper, *In Tune with the World*, 22.