

SESSION 5

Health

How do we understand life versus non-life, or death? How do we understand health versus disease? Especially since we will all ultimately experience loss of ability, either physical or mental, what does it mean to live a full human life?

HEALTH - I

Do Biologists Believe in the Existence of Life?

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ATTEMPTS TO DEFINE “health” and “disease” typically lead to undisguised eye-rolling. Similar reactions occur if one tries to define “life” and “death.” Why are such exercises not merely boring and silly, but above all, *futile*?

At the risk of inducing more eye-rolling, I will start this discussion, as is my wont, with two passages from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. (Warning: there is one more to come after this). These two are from Episode Three, “Proteus.” Stephen Dedalus, one of the protagonists of the novel, is walking along Sandymount Strand, thinking about wildly diverse topics: Aristotle, art, his time in Paris, which ended not quite one year earlier when his mother died, and famously, the ineluctable modality of the visible. At one point we read the following:

A bloated carcass of a dog lay lolled on bladderwrack. Before him the gunwale of a boat, sunk in sand. Un coche ensablé Louis Veuillot called Gautier’s prose.¹ These heavy sands are language tide and wind have silted here.²

1 Seeing the boat’s gunwale stuck in the sand reminds Stephen of a comment that Louis Veuillot made about Théophile Gautier’s prose: he called it “Un coche ensablé” (a coach stuck in the sand). Veuillot’s animus towards Gautier was political as well as esthetic. Théophile Gautier (1811-82) was known as a “flamboyant” romantic (read “libertine,” “hedonist,” or “pagan”) who held traditional religious morality in contempt. Veuillot was an ardent Catholic, who also defended the role of the church in secular politics; in fact, he was a leader of the Ultramontane party. But for Stephen Dedalus, the point is also about language: in Veuillot’s view, Gautier lost his battle with words, because his writings got bogged down by too many superlatives – or to put it another way, got stuck in the mud: “These heavy sands are language tide and wind have silted here.” In this Episode of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus has been ruminating about history, which, as he said earlier in the novel, “is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake”; he fears, perhaps, that he too will be stuck in time and end up as dead as this dog.

2 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986), 47. The passage

Much of this chapter is about Stephen Dedalus's developing a theory of art, and there are many literary associations we don't have time to go into. I'm showing this because a lot of the chapter is about the juxtaposition of opposites. The next paragraph begins:

A point, live dog, grew into sight running across the sweep of sand.
Lord, is he going to attack me? Respect his liberty. You will not be
master of others or their slave. I have my stick. Sit tight. From farther
away, walking shoreward across from the crested tide, figures, two.³

Stephen Dedalus, like James Joyce, was afraid of dogs and didn't much care for them. Let's take the last point first: the "Who?" that the dog is running back to are two cocklepickers on the strand.⁴ The dog runs back to them after having sniffed the carcass of the dead dog, for which his master scolds him, then urinates, and then digs in the sand. The reference to masters and slaves suggests something we learn about Stephen Dedalus elsewhere: that he has been reading some Hegel and Nietzsche, though as we also learn, he was not especially wowed by either of them.

Why did Joyce show us two dogs, one dead, lolling on the bladderwrack, and one alive and, Dedalus fears, about to attack him? The passage is incredibly rich with literary associations,⁵ but the particular juxtaposition of opposites,

continues: "And these, the stoneheaps of dead builders, a warren of weasel rats. Hide gold there. Try it. You have some. Sands and stones. Heavy of the past. Sir Lout's toys. Mind you don't get one bang on the ear. I'm the bloody well gigant rolls all them bloody well boulders, bones for my steppingstones. Feefawfum. I zmeellz de bloodz odz an Iridzman." The reference to "Sir Lout" is part of a complex of associations about giants in Irish folklore and in Wagner (Fasolt and Fafner in *Das Rheingold*), among others.

3 Joyce, *Ulysses*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986), 37.

4 Identified as a couple of "red Egyptians," "the ruffian and his strolling mort" in Joyce, *Ulysses*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986), 39.

5 One is that this juxtaposition harks back to earlier references in the chapter on the aesthetics of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in *Laocöon*, where that author used the words *nacheinander* (after-one-another) and *nebeneinander* (next-to-one-another), as Stephen had recalled at the start of this chapter. To Lessing, poetry (and music) present things *nacheinander*, while painting represents things *nebeneinander*. Joyce's art, we might say, does some of both: showing us two dogs, one alive and one dead, next to each other in the chapter and in space is a rhetorical representation *both nebeneinander and nacheinander*.

here, is life and death.⁶ In one way, this is an obvious point; but in another sense, the point is anything but obvious. We have two dogs, each of which Stephen Dedalus instantly recognizes as dead or alive, and it was as obvious to Stephen as it is to us how he knew which is which. But let's ponder this point a bit. *How* did Stephen know this? The obvious part of this is that we, like many other species, have evolved in such a way that we *had to be able* to know the difference. We can summarize by saying that a creature that cannot tell the difference between a live animal, which could be a predator, and a dead animal, which could be food, will not survive for long. In other words, we are hardwired to know and recognize things like “life” and “death” or “disease” and “health,” such that we can simply refer to the two dogs as alive and dead, respectively. On the most obvious level, we make observations and draw inferences. We are empirical creatures: so we see in an instant that one dog has a bloated carcass and lies—or “lolls”—motionless on bladderwrack, while the other runs, barks, and later urinates, digs, and could, potentially, have attacked Stephen Dedalus.

And now for the non-obvious part, which is that we do not fare very well whenever we try to *define* these words. Do empirical observations and inferences from them suffice as *definitions*? Yes and no. So let's first consider why attempts to define words like “life”, and “death” or “health” and “disease” lead not only to eye-rolling, but a sense of futility.

Let's start with the fact that such discussions so often end with circular reasoning. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, for example, defines disease as “a condition of the living animal or plant body or of one of its parts that impairs normal functioning and is typically manifested by distinguishing signs and symptoms.”⁷ The same dictionary defines health as “the condition of being sound in body, mind, or spirit, *especially*: freedom from physical disease or pain.”⁸ In other words, disease is not health, and health is not

6 Perhaps the most important pair of opposites he juxtaposed was in his description of Dublin as Dear Dirty Dublin, which like the River Liffey that bisects it, is both dear and dirty at the same time. In dialectics more generally, Joyce usually argued not for *either/or*, but for *both/and*.

7 Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “disease,” www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disease.

8 Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “health,” www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/health.

disease—disease impedes health, and healthy people are those not disturbed or weighed down by disease.

Another “sin” of defining commonly found in dictionaries is defining by giving examples and synonyms. Dictionary.com gives the following definition of disease: “a disordered or incorrectly functioning organ, part, structure, or system of the body resulting from the effect of genetic or developmental errors, infection, poisons, nutritional deficiency or imbalance, toxicity, or unfavorable environmental factors; illness; sickness; ailment.”⁹ And health would be, “the general condition of the body or mind with reference to soundness and vigor; soundness of body or mind; freedom from disease or ailment.”¹⁰ Of course, defining by giving examples is only another guise of circularity.

Medical dictionaries do not fare any better. Medical Dictionary Online, for example, does a bit of both the circularity thing and the examples-as-definition thing. It defines health as “The state of the organism when it functions optimally without evidence of disease.”¹¹ Disease is “a definite pathologic process with a characteristic set of signs and symptoms. It may affect the whole body or any of its parts, and its etiology, pathology, and prognosis may be known or unknown.”¹² The situation is not improved if one tries to broaden health to include “wellness” (as the W.H.O. tried to do), not mere freedom from disease.

In short, disease is the loss of health, while health is the absence of disease—and round and round, ad infinitum. I call this approach “Nosological Manicheism,” by analogy to Manicheism (as per Augustine and Thomas Aquinas), which defined good and evil in terms of one another, as opposing forces.

As I know from my experience teaching, there is a striking contrast between the introductory lectures given in a biochemistry or pathology class, as compared with those given in literature or philosophy classes. In classes about literature, it is commonplace for students and instructors to debate the

9 Dictionary.com, s.v. “disease,” www.dictionary.com/browse/disease.

10 Dictionary.com, s.v. “health,” www.dictionary.com/browse/health.

11 Medical Dictionary Online, s.v. “health,” www.online-medical-dictionary.org/definitions-h/health.html.

12 Medical Dictionary Online, s.v. “disease,” www.online-medical-dictionary.org/definitions-d/disease.html.

ins and outs of what the word “text” means, or what a “good” or “great” text is, and whether these are valid categories, or what an “author” or “reader” is. In the introduction to biochemistry, however, the students would find it an offensive waste of their time if the instructor spent more than a sentence or two defining biochemistry. In Pathology, this type of introduction *might* be expanded to three sentences, or even four, but no more. It would suffice to say that disease is the result of malfunctioning cellular and organismal physiology and the accompanying abnormal anatomy—never mind the “normativity” of such a definition. After that, everyone would breathe a sigh of relief that the introduction was over *at last*, so we could just get down to business.

There is a parallel problem in defining “life”. One must admire the editors of Wikipedia for their bravery. Their article on “Life” begins:

Life is a characteristic that distinguishes physical entities that have biological processes, such as signaling and self-sustaining processes, from those that do not, either because such functions have ceased (they have died) or because they never had such functions and are classified as inanimate. Various forms of life exist, such as plants, animals, fungi, protists, archaea, and bacteria. Biology is the science that studies life.¹³

Again: circularity, examples, and synonyms. But it’s not their fault. Definitions of “life” rapidly descend into the observable features of living things, leaving behind, as rapidly as possible, any discussion of what life is. We are in the age of biology, and I am a biological scientist, but oddly enough, one can ask, do biologists believe in the existence of life? Yes—and no, for scientists are nothing if not reductive, and living beings get rapidly reduced to their mechanisms and materials.

The difference between the sciences and humanistic disciplines is not a question of which is the “better,” “fuller,” or “more mature” discipline, as some might say. Rather, the difference is what types of causality each discipline seeks to understand. While sciences confine themselves exclusively to efficient and material causes, they avoid formal causes (e.g., “What is health or disease? What is life or death?”) like the plague, and get downright nasty

13 “Life,” Wikipedia, September 14, 2022, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life.

if someone tries to bring up teleology (final cause). Is this a good thing or not? Not only scientists, but even some philosophers got fairly testy about any talk of essences and substances, considering such Aristotelian categories as antiquated or unnecessary. Consider, for example, the case of Charles II of England, who posed an interesting philosophical problem to the Royal Society: why does a dead fish weigh more than a live one? They came up with some very ingenious answers, some having to do with the soul, which is the *form* of things that live, until he said, “Actually, it doesn’t.” So, to quote Robert Pasnau, why not just weigh the fish?¹⁴ There are indeed times when we ought to just weigh the fish. But is this enough?

First let’s consider how we got here. It all started long before Friedrich Wöhler’s got into the picture, but in 1826, he synthesized urea, an “organic” or “living” compound, from “inorganic” chemicals. This was the announcement of the death of vitalism – though it continued, zombie-like, to walk the night for a long time after that.

Louis Pasteur and Claude Bernard were the two giants of 19th century biology and experimental medicine, the epicenter of which was in France. They were, as we would say now, *frenemies*. They respected, even revered each other, but they were also rivals. They were acutely aware of who was being honored more. Something more substantial that they differed on was the nature of infectious disease: Pasteur favored *le germe* while Bernard favored *le terrain*. This is no longer an issue, since they were both right, but Pasteur was said to have conceded to Bernard on his deathbed, saying, “Bernard avait raison. Le germe n'est rien, c'est le terrain qui est tout.” In any case, these slides¹⁵ list some of their many great achievements, but also point out another thing they differed on: vitalism. Pasteur was a vitalist, while Bernard was not. Both studied fermentation, but only Pasteur believed that fermentation was a living process, using vital chemistry – in other words, it required living cells. Pasteur was proven definitively wrong on this point by Eduard Buchner, who

14 Robert Pasnau, “Why not just weigh the fish?” *New York Times*, 29 June 2014.

15 At the meeting, the following were mentioned. Louis Pasteur was the discoverer of vaccines against rabies and anthrax, discoverer of optical activity in organic chemistry, the inventor of “pasteurization”, a proponent of the “germ theory” of infectious diseases – and a believer in vitalism. Claude Bernard discovered the physiological role of the exocrine pancreas, discovered normal glycemia, discovered the physiological principle of homeostasis, was the author of *Introduction à la médecine expérimentale* – and an opponent of vitalism.

showed that “press juice” derived from yeast but containing no cells could carry out fermentation. This would seem to have been the nail in the coffin of vitalism, but as I say, it lived on.

Was it a good or bad thing that vitalism has lived on? Maybe some of both. To start with the bad part, consider the following effort on the part of Dr. Duncan MacDougall of Haverhill, Massachusetts, who in 1907 proposed to measure the weight of the human soul. He had patients who were about to die of tuberculosis: he put their deathbeds on a scale, and measured the weight change as they died. The science was bad—really bad—and he got a deserved skewering in the press for it. But bad science was not the worst of it: his metaphysics was worse. This is the problem with vitalism, why essentially all scientists hate it, and with some good reason—though, as I will continue to say, they just might, to use the cliché, be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Here are three complaints against vitalism:

1. It attempts to posit a negative. This was Pasteur’s error: claiming that fermentation *cannot* occur without living cells.
2. Vitalism is *content-less*. This was the criticism of Theodor Schwann and other 19th century mechanists,¹⁶ who argued that a force is a *force* only if it can be measured.
3. It’s hopelessly vague – a vague squishy concept and consequently, prone to junking up.

Now, Henri Bergson attempted to rescue “the baby”, as it were, by positing what he called *élan vital*, which is inadequately and inaccurately translated as “vital force” – and for this reason, he got pilloried by the likes of Julian Huxley, otherwise known as Darwin’s Bulldog, who said this: “To say that biological progress is explained by the *élan vital* is to say that the movement of the train is ‘explained’ by an *élan locomotif* of the engine.”

The issue, however, is what one means by “explain.” When it comes to “weighing the fish,” let’s concede that *élan vital* has no explanatory power.

16 These also included du Bois Reymond, Helmholtz, Ludwig, and Brücke. See John Scott Haldane, *The Sciences and Philosophy*, Lecture II: The Rise of Mechanistic Biology, <https://www.giffordlectures.org/books/sciences-and-philosophy/lecture-ii-rise-mechanistic-biology>.

What else can “explain” mean? Why is it that at times weighing the fish is not enough?

Pasnau gave his own answers to this question, and I recommend this opinion piece if you haven’t seen it. But I want to start my answer by going back to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, this time Episode Nine. In this Episode, Stephen Dedalus expounds his theory on Shakespeare in the National Library in Dublin. Among the listeners is George William Russell, theosophist and poet, who went by the pseudonym, *AE*, standing for “aeon.” In an interior monologue peppered with Shakespearean idiom, Joyce rendered Stephen’s thoughts during an interlude between two parts of his exposition on Shakespeare as follows:

How now, sirrah, that pound he lent you when you were hungry?
 Marry, I wanted it.
 Take thou this noble.
 Go to! You spent most of it in Georgina Johnson's bed, clergyman's
 daughter. Agenbite of inwit.
 Do you intend to pay it back?
 O, yes.
 When? Now?
 Well...No.
 When, then?
 I paid my way. I paid my way.
 Steady on. He's from beyant Boyne water. The northeast corner.
 You owe it.
 Wait. Five months. Molecules all change. I am other I now. Other
 I got pound.
 Buzz. Buzz.
 But I, entelechy, form of forms, am I by memory because under
 everchanging forms.
 I that sinned and prayed and fasted.
 A child Connemee saved from pandies.
 I, I and I. I.
 A.E.I.O.U.¹⁷

17 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 182.

The impecunious Stephen Dedalus borrowed a pound from AE, claiming hunger, but as was his wont, spent it instead on his favorite prostitute, Georgina Johnson—and for this he has *agenbite of inwit*, (“remorse of conscience,” from the title of a confessional work written in a Kentish dialect of Middle English). He intends to pay AE back—someday, maybe. He recalls how his some-time boss, Mr. Deasy, had berated him for his spendthrift ways, for as Deasy proclaimed, the proudest boast of any Englishman was “I paid my way.” But then again, that was Mr. Deasy; Mr. Deasy is easily dismissed, for he is either a Unionist (favoring Ireland’s remaining part of Great Britain) or worse, an Orangeman. (“Beyant” is Irish dialect for “beyond,” and “The Boyne Water” is an Ulster Protestant folksong commemorating the victory of King William III of Orange over [Catholic] James II at the Battle of the Boyne). In other words, by the rules of the governing (British) force—the “establishment”—he must pay. But is this enough? Can he escape payment on account of being an oppressed Irish subject? Not really.¹⁸

Then comes a brainstorm: he devises a clever stratagem. He got the pound five months ago, and in the meantime, his molecules have all changed; so it was an “other I” that got the pound, and if this is correct, there should be no need for the current “I” to repay it. But he realizes that this stratagem just won’t work. As he says, “But I, entelechy, form of forms, am I by memory because under everchanging forms.”¹⁹ Here Dedalus plays with the word “form”: although his appearance—the external form of Stephen Dedalus—is ever-changing, there is something that underlies it all.²⁰ And this is “entelechy, form of forms”—that is, the actuality, the realization of the Form, which underlies all these various superficial “forms.” But how does he even know that such a thing exists? He knows it “by memory”: however much the molecules might change, there is a unified “I,” an entelechy under all of the “everchanging forms”: the “I that sinned and prayed and fasted,” and the “I” that, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Father Conmee had saved from

18 Stephen Dedalus, though not unionist, also is not much of an Irish nationalist. He disdains most enthusiasms.

19 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 182.

20 Dedalus had pondered the issue of change—the modality of the visible and the auditory—earlier in the novel, in Episode 3, which begins with the memorable phrase, “The ineluctable modality of the visible.”

an unjust pandying.²¹ Memory is a power of the soul, according to Aquinas, whom Dedalus quotes early and often. In the end, there might be many I's: "I, I and I"; but they all somehow add up to just one "I." The conclusion is inevitable—or, if you will, ineluctable. There is no way out: "A.E.I.O.U."

This execrable pun (all good puns are execrable) tells us that the unity of the soul, which Stephen Dedalus knows through a power of the soul—memory—entails moral responsibility.²² To cut a very long argument *very short* in the interest of time/space: moral responsibility requires personhood, and for this one needs a soul, or as Stephen Dedalus said, *entelechy, form of forms...by memory*.

Stephen spoke about molecules all changing in five months. There is a similar and somewhat lighthearted fictional treatment of a serious medical-ethical question from Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao*. There is a minor character, the Lawyer Frank Tull, who has many artificial parts—which in modern, medical practice could resemble prostheses (e.g., artificial heart valves) or transplants. Does it follow that he ceases to be Frank Tull? This is, really, a variant of an ancient philosophical question: the Ship of Theseus.²³

21 This is a clever rhetorical flourish: even if the reader of *Ulysses* doesn't know this, Joyce lets us know that Stephen Dedalus does. Or maybe Joyce just assumed that we've all read *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

22 In the novel, two of the protagonists, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, ponder the relationship between body and soul. In a sense, both view body and soul as unified, but with a difference. To Bloom, the soul enters the body; hence, it can also leave the body and enter a different body—a theme that the novel explores as *metempsychosis*, the transmigration of the soul. But Bloom's attitude leads to the dismal conclusion that at death, nothing of the person survives; souls are only rented for a term of time. Earlier in the novel (Episode Six), Bloom attended the funeral of one Paddy Dignam. Seeing him being buried, Bloom reflects on the heart: "A pump after all, pumping thousands of gallons of *blood* every day. One fine day it gets bunged up: and there you are. Lots of them lying around here: lungs, hearts, livers. Old rusty pumps: damn the thing else. ... Once you are dead you are dead" (102). True, according to some; if there are only atoms colliding at chance, if there is only matter in the universe, then why should it be anything but a matter (no pun) of indifference whether the pump gets rusted and "bunged up", and once you're dead you're dead. In any event, this is of a piece with the view that the heart, or any other part of the anatomy is mere material and mechanism. In contrast, for Dedalus, supersaturated as he is with the philosophy of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, it would be more accurate to say that the body is in the soul than that the soul is in the body, which would allow an inference that the soul is subsistent, i.e., it might subsist after death, after the separation of body and soul.

23 In the talk, I gave the version from Plutarch, though there are many variants, including one from Hobbes.

Joyce's citation of Aristotle, both directly and by way of Thomas Aquinas, reminds us of the four ways in which *cause* is spoken of. In the interest of time, I don't think we need to review this, but I would be happy to discuss it later. My main point is this: I contend that while formal and final causality may be beyond the reach of laboratory science, they are not necessarily impossible for the universe.

If defining disease and health in terms of one another is "Nosological Manicheism", then let us call the approach I will advocate "Nosological Thomism," after Thomas Aquinas. In brief, we cannot help ourselves: opposing health and disease, like opposing good and evil, is an epistemological necessity: we cannot otherwise conceive of these things. But it is essential to distinguish between the epistemological plane—how we know things—and the ontological plane—what things are—even if we do not *fully* know what things are.

I want to recapitulate a few points about the epistemology of Thomas Aquinas very briefly, but we can continue this discussion later.

Thomas's epistemology emphasizes the centrality of empirical data and sees the acquisition of knowledge (I am confining this discussion to "natural reason", i.e., unaided by revelation) as the abstraction of essences or universals, starting with observation of the created world. As such, his epistemology is especially congenial to science.

In spite of how much Thomas Aquinas credits the human intellect with, his epistemology also includes serious limits on what we can possibly know. We do not perceive essences directly, and even less can we understand Existence (*Esse*). The metaphysical principle that underlies the latter statement, like so much else in Thomas's metaphysics, is that in God, and in God alone, existence and essence are the same. For much the same reason, we can know something *about* the transcendentals, but not the transcendentals *in themselves*.²⁴

24 Recall that Thomas identified the following as transcendentals: Res (thing), Unum (one), Aliquid (something), Bonum (the good), Verum (truth). Opinion is divided on whether he included Pulchritudo (beauty) among the transcendentals. Aersten said no, Maritain said yes. Gilson tended towards "yes". Aersten's argument is that Thomas wrote of beauty and goodness that they are the same in reality, differing only in appealing to different faculties (the cognitive faculty for beauty, the appetites for goodness); therefore it would be redundant to speak of beauty as a transcendental. A relevant quote, from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New Advent, 2017): Ia q.5 a.4, www.newadvent.org/summa/1086.htm, is: "Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally; for

I cannot go into details here,²⁵ but the answer to the question I posed at the start of this talk derives from this point. It also follows from this that attempts to define words like “life” and “health” inevitably will be futile.

Yet, Thomas also maintained that it is possible, indeed necessary, to know something about the transcendentals and about God. Much of what we know about God and about the transcendentals is through negation. For example, quoting Aristotle, Thomas noted that “the infinite, considered as such, is unknown, since “on material things the infinite does not exist actually, but only potentially, in the sense of one succeeding another, as is said Phys. iii, 6.”²⁶ We form only inexact ideas of infinity – and yet, we *can* form *some* inexact idea of it. The same is true, *a fortiori*, of God, Who is “a form unlimited by matter”. We *must know something* of God: as Thomas wrote, “if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void.”²⁷ And this, the optimistic Thomas finds impossible. At the same time, “we cannot know God in our present life except through material effects.”²⁸

Even when it comes to ordinary material things, there are also limits. Thomas states:

Science treats of higher things principally by way of negation. Thus Aristotle (De Coel. i, 3) explains the heavenly bodies by denying to them inferior corporeal properties. Hence it follows that much less

they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and consequently goodness is praised as beauty. But they differ logically, for goodness properly relates to the appetite (goodness being what all things desire); and therefore it has the aspect of an end (the appetite being a kind of movement towards a thing). On the other hand, beauty relates to the cognitive faculty; for beautiful things are those which please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportion...”

Maybe this means only that moderns *care* a whole lot more about beauty than the medieval did. Another argument against including beauty among the transcendentals: Thomas Aquinas never explicitly included beauty among them.

25 This argument appears in my nearly completed book, *Disease and the Problem of Evil*.

26 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New Advent, 2017), Ia q.86 a.2, www.newadvent.org/summa/.

27 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q.12 a.1.

28 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q.86 a.2.

can immaterial substances be known by us in such a way as to make us know their quiddity; but we may have a scientific knowledge of them by way of negation and by their relation to material things.²⁹

What is translated, here, as “science” is *scientia*. Thomas (and many others) distinguished between *cognitio* and *intellectus*. *Cognitio* is how sensible and intelligible features of the world, and propositions concerning these features, are understood. *Intellectus* is a further form of knowing, which concerns the most basic propositions—the first principles that constitute the various “sciences,” which include mathematics and logic, as well as the natural sciences. His understanding of the neuroscience behind these processes, which he derived almost unmodified from Albertus Magnus, Ibn-Sina and earlier authors, is antiquated and incorrect, yet it was an attempt at neurological localization and mechanism.

The quote above from Thomas Aquinas deals with the question of whether corporeal beings like us can understand immaterial substances, and the particular case he considers are incorporeal beings—the angels. But the issue for us need not be angels, in which, in all probability, many or most of us do not believe. Rather, the quote is in line with the approach of speaking of God in the *via negativa*, in which saying that God is infinite is to say that He is not finite, or saying that God is simple amounts to saying that he is not composite, and so forth. What is true for *created* immaterial substances is infinitely more true for the uncreated immaterial being, God.³⁰ But even for material things—“bodies,” in his parlance—knowledge, both *cognitio* and *intellectus*, consists of the rendering of the corporeal into the incorporeal territory of the intellect.

Yet at the same time, Thomas’s approach is not purely negative, for there is always, simultaneously, the possibility of the *via affirmativa*: ways in which we can describe even God positively—through the things that are made. We can describe God as wise, for example, and in doing so, we are ascribing to God a quality we know only in nature—that is, in wise human beings. It is true, of course, that in God we understand that the quality of wisdom exceeds

29 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q.88 a.2.

30 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q.88 a.3.

anything we experience in nature and with our limited natures.³¹ Within these boundaries, positive knowledge of God and of metaphysics is possible.

I will close with a few very brief reflections on an important topic that I treat in detail elsewhere:³² the relationship between disease and the Problem of Evil. To a reader grounded solely in the sciences, it might seem odd to say that medicine and pathology also have a metaphysical side, and how one thinks about disease is, in a larger part than some people realize, fundamentally a religious question. To say this is not to espouse any one particular religious tradition, and for that matter, atheism is also a religion, or at least, a religious stance. Physicians and others who treat patients – who try to give comfort to people suffering from disease, or to those whose lives and well-beings are threatened by disease – can be said to *fight against* disease. This is for them a particular species of fighting against evil. One can recognize the large measure of self-interest in “privileging” health over disease, or life over death; but is there any other reason? Put more broadly, is there any reason to “privilege” what one (let’s keep this as general as possible) calls “good” over whatever one calls “evil”?

In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius wrote, “Si Deus est, unde malum? Si non est, unde bonum?”³³ From this succinct statement of the Problem of Evil, the first question is posed frequently, the second much less so. Boethius left unsaid the usual expansion of the problem of evil by not specifying that by “God”, he was referring to one God who was both omnipotent and omnibenevolent;³⁴ this was to be understood. Thus, God’s omnipotence *could* prevent evil, and His omnibenevolence *would* prevent evil – yet plainly evil exists in the world. As is well known, the response of

31 This is a complex question which space will not allow us to go into. In brief, words like “exceeds”, and analogy more generally, are problematic because they suggest proportionality between God and creatures, but the gap between God and creatures is incommensurable.

32 As stated above, this argument appears in my nearly completed book, *Disease and the Problem of Evil*.

33 “If God exists, whence evil? If not, whence good?” Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (The Project Gutenberg, 2004), IV, [www.gutenberg.org/files/ 14328/14328-h/ 14328-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14328/14328-h/14328-h.htm).

34 The fuller statement of the problem of evil appears as a full *trilemma*, for example, in David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, where it is attributed to Epicurus, and probably derived from statements in Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*.

Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to this problem centers on the significance of the word “exists” – not to deny that there is evil in the world, which is obvious to anyone, but to deny that evil has its own nature and subsisting existence. I find it useful when discussing this topic to refer to existence, as Étienne Gilson did,³⁵ using the original Latin, *esse*.

We’ll leave aside this complicated set of questions and focus on the second half of Boethius’s statement, one that not infrequently is left unasked. Not entirely unasked, however, for, notably, Nietzsche asked whether we are about to go beyond good and evil. Is the good nothing more than naked self-interest – or, if one is a biologist, a useful adaptation? Returning for now to the humbler ground of medicine and disease, how should one think about health and disease as examples of good and evil, respectively – or should one not do so? Is “health” merely another name, in the sphere of biology, for naked self-interest or useful biological adaptation?

I will briefly state, without defending (which I do elsewhere), one answer to these questions. In order to think about life and death, or health and disease, as goods – to “privilege” them over disease and death – one must grant them a portion of *esse*, with a nature or essence. Such an analysis, like that of Thomas Aquinas’s analysis of evil, depends critically on being able to separate epistemology from ontology. The most fundamental principle in Thomas’s epistemology starts with the statement that in God, essence and existence are the same; as we cannot (in this life) know God’s existence through direct observation, we also cannot know essences directly. Rather, we garner data about our world empirically, through our senses and then make inferences and generalizations, working our way asymptotically towards essences.

In any case, the fact that we cannot know essences directly but can only make inferences about them—write poems about them, as it were—does not mean that we should put on blinders and believe only that which we can see, hear, touch, smell and taste. There is, in other words, such a thing as life, even if we cannot see directly, it as it is, with our earthly eyes.

35 In many works, but see, for example, Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies; 2nd edition, 1952.

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HEALTH - II

What is Life? A Theological Response

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LET ME START by playfully modifying a passage from the Gospel of John (14:5-6): “Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”³⁶

This passage seems supremely fitting for a conference that has taken up a question about the nature of life. And as with almost all Biblical passages, it is easier to declaim its words but far more difficult to illuminate its intelligibility. What does Jesus mean when he identifies himself with “the life?” This is what I would like to explore with you all today.

In order to present a fitting interpretation, it is necessary at the outset to present the principles that will guide our approach. Let me list them here so as to allow us to anticipate their appearance as we proceed.

Principle one: there is no tradition-less being in the world.

Principle two: that which cannot be explained can still be storied.

Principle three: Jesus Christ, who once lived, died, and rose from the dead, ascended so as now to take the form of His Church, and we might say IS the form of Christianity itself.

With these in mind, let us attempt to render Jesus’ self-identification as “the Life” more intelligible.

36 John 14:5-6 NRSVCE

I

All human beings arrive into communities already underway. To live a human life necessarily entails being given to some community held together by an “argument” as Alisdair MacIntyre puts it, “extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined”³⁷ often according to conflicts both internal to the community itself and external with other communities.

This is what we theologians mean when we speak of ‘tradition.’ As Sandra Schneiders characterizes it, “Tradition is the actualization in the present, in and through language of the most valued and critically important aspects of the community’s experience, or more precisely, of the community’s experience of itself as it has been selectively appropriated and deliberately transmitted. Tradition is the primary form and norm of effective historical consciousness, which is the medium of ongoing community experience.”³⁸

Therefore, human life is inescapably a life lived in tradition, or to reiterate our initial articulation, there is no tradition-less being in the world.

The first reason this is important to state upfront is because how one approaches questions about life (and death, we should probably add) are in large measure determined by the tradition that has laid claim to the one asking the question. Tradition serves as one of the most primary and important conditions for the possibility of asking and responding to questions of any kind, especially those about life and death.

The second reason this principle is important to foreground is that the truth of this first principle, that there is no tradition-less being in the world, has been obscured by the dominant tradition today—what most scholars identify as “the Liberal tradition.”

As Francis Fukuyama so eloquently wrote in *The End of History and the Last Man*, arguably the apologetic text of the Liberal tradition, with the ascendancy of the Liberal tradition, history now comes to an end because in Liberalism, human beings are finally fully human—that is, they now bear the

37 Alisdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 12.

38 Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

final form of the human being; we are therefore, all of us, the ‘last man’—that is, the final form of humanity.³⁹

Since to be fully human means to be “Liberal,” according to the Liberal tradition, all other traditions are reduced to mere adornment to be chosen (or not) as one lives out one’s otherwise Liberal human life. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Taoism, Buddhism, indeed all the once great traditions that helped shape the world, are now rendered mere choices that add ornamentation to the final form of humanity that only the liberal tradition can provide. The values these once great traditions espoused are certainly allowed to have a voice in Liberal society, but only if those voices agree to silence themselves the moment the Liberal voice begins to clear its throat.

My intention here is not simply critique, but rather critical appreciation. I am grateful, after all, for some of the values that have been foregrounded by the Liberal tradition, and I would rather live here and now than any other time or place. I would even extend this to what the Liberal tradition has enabled us to know about the nature of life, and in particular human life.

One reason behind Fukuyama’s triumphal claims about the Liberal tradition derives from his understanding of how it has harnessed the powers of science and technology in ways that not only reveal a deeper sense of what human life involves, but also improve conditions in which human life may flourish. It has certainly enabled our late modern world to affirm the basic mechanistic elements of life. Life, as such mechanistic explanations would espouse, entails substantial growth, self-motility, and, in principle, the ability to reproduce.

But as necessary as these elements are for recognizing something as alive, they do not exhaust the full nature of life and thus do not constitute a fitting framework for our purposes; clearly Jesus meant more than, “I am the ability to substantially grow, to move, and to reproduce.” These are certainly important elements of the nature of life, but given their empirical contours they remain partial and thus incomplete without a fuller sense of what it means to live a human life.

39 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). It may not need mentioning, the term ‘Liberal tradition’ does not identify the political left today, but the whole ethos that comes into being around the 16th/17th century and now includes many factions: liberal, conservative, neoliberal, neoconservative, libertarian, progressive, et al.

II

If we are to transcend the limits of empirical explanations of life, we must turn to our second principle: that which cannot be explained can still be storied. The word “explain” comes from two Latin roots: “ex,” meaning “out” and “planus” meaning “to flatten.” So, etymologically the word “explain” means “to flatten out.” That is, our late modern, or Liberal, proclivity to explanation is bound up with a kind of reduction of the world to our human image, a reduction of the complexities we often seek to explain.

Now, often, the complexities that constitute life are indeed rendered more intelligible by means of explanation, that is, by flattening that complexity out into something that fits into our concepts and categories, those cognitive tools that enable us to think in determinate, discursive, and dianoetic ways to acquire a degree of mastery over the world. Indeed, the force of explanation has proven to be so powerful that the Liberal tradition espouses it as the most effective way to understand the world. Explanation has disciplined the Liberal habit of mind so much so that those features of our existence that appear to defy explanation are commonly viewed as irrational and insignificant and thus unworthy of our attention.

The problem, however, is that there are many phenomena in human life that defy explanation, that resist the will to determination that derives from our explanatory efforts. Take, for instance, phenomena like faith, freedom, love, and beauty, or even disability, trauma, and suffering. Each bears more meaning than explanations can convey, that is, each bears a plenitude of intelligibility that, although inviting our explanatory efforts, remain always in excess of those efforts. Indeed, every element of human life that makes life worth living seems to defy the reductive will to explanation that is part of the currency of the Liberal tradition.

This is one reason Augustine famously proclaimed, “if you want to understand, you must first believe.”⁴⁰ Belief, as Augustine knew well, involves participation in the plenitude of a phenomenon’s intelligibility, a participation in the very conditions that allow understanding to arrive. Belief

40 Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New York: New City Press, 2009), Homily 29, 6.

brings an openness, understanding brings closure. Belief is other-oriented, understanding is more self-oriented. In this light, then, we might repurpose Augustine's insight and say, "if you want explanation, you must first story."

If we are to render Christ's identification with life intelligible, we must view it through this lens. Although much can be learned about the nature of life, of human life, from our scientific explanatory powers, life remains always in excess of these powers. Life, to borrow a term from the contemporary French phenomenologist Jean Luc Marion, is a saturated phenomenon: an arrival of being that is more than its appearance.⁴¹ Or, it might be described in the language of contemporary philosopher William Desmond: life is a hyperbole of being—that is, the presence of something transcendent within the immanent emergence of being, rendering being in excess of all finite cognition even as it invites finite cognition to deeper understanding.⁴²

In both senses, life is a phenomenon that exceeds our human capacity to explain, even though explanation helps in its own way. Rather, as a plenitude of intelligible content, as a saturated phenomenon and a hyperbole of being, life shows itself to be more effectively made intelligible through a power of storytelling. For, as our second principle states, that which cannot be explained can still be storied.

Jesus knew this all too well, which is why his pedagogy was parabolic before it was explanatory. The realities of the Kingdom of God can never be simply reduced to our cognitive mastery, but are most effectively communicated through parables, stories, that invite as much subjective participation by the listener as they reveal objective truths.

The primary reason we are storytelling creatures before we are explanatory derives from the fact that human life is, from origin to end, immersed in the phenomenon of beauty, immersed in the beautiful itself. As the ancients and medievals knew well, beauty identifies being's appearance, which necessarily involves symmetry, harmony, proportion, diversities-in-unity, and many other modes of beauty's arrival. One of beauty's most significant modes of

41 See, e.g., Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies in Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

42 See, e.g., William Desmond, *The Intimate Universal: The Hidden Porosity Among Religion, Art, Philosophy, and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

appearance is as a plenitude of intelligible content that, precisely as a plenitude, anagogically provokes the human intellect to ever deeper and more noble realities of existence.

Consider two forms that beauty takes in human life: humor and music. Both are intelligible to human intellects in ways that exceed explanation and discursive understanding. Indeed, when human beings attempt to explain either humor or music, the most salient aspects of those phenomena quickly begin to dissolve. One is reminded of the cartoon depicting a new arrival into heaven and God telling him “if I have to explain the meaning of life to you, it won’t be funny.” Beauty reveals that human life, especially at its most desirable moments, occupies a fullness, a plenitude, where we are opened to, as St. Paul puts it, “the one in whom we live, and move, and have our being.”⁴³ Beauty unclogs our natural porosity to the divine fullness that funds our daily existence.

Human life is an experience of God’s very being, but experienced as a fullness, a plenitude, something that, precisely because it is too much for us, distills itself over a lifetime as a call, inviting us ever more deeply into intimate relation with it. But such experiences remain unintelligible and without meaning until they are brought into our economy of language, enabling us to discern meaning.

Here it becomes possible to recognize, as the medievals loved to do, a Trinitarian vestige within the structure that constitutes human life; namely, the Trinity of Experience, Language, and Meaning.⁴⁴

God the Father, the One in Whom we live and move and have our being,⁴⁵ the One Who identifies Himself as existence, as Being itself,⁴⁶ is the condition for the possibility of any and every Experience. God the Son, who assumes a

43 Acts 17:28.

44 One way to define “meaning” here is: *a discerned valence, interpreted for behavioral output*. Human beings are creatures immersed in a range of valences, forces of attraction, that call to us every moment of our existence. To harness “Meaning” requires that we discern which valence to attend to, and once attended, we interpret the valence in order to integrate it into our act of life, that is, the behavior we put out into the world.

45 Acts 17:28

46 Ex 3:14

human nature in the person of Jesus Christ, is also identified as God's Word, the condition for the possibility of Language and thus of all communication and interpretation. The Holy Spirit, the one that the Nicene Creed identifies as "the Lord, the Giver of Life," then corresponds to Meaning in this Trinitarian vestige. Here, experience can only become meaningful through language, through the Word.

III

So perhaps we can register a first interpretive insight into Jesus' self-identification with "the Life": as God's Word, Jesus—the Christ form—is "the Life" because the Christ-form gives meaning to life, makes life full of meaning, makes life meaning-full. To draw attention now to our final principle, Christianity, as the tradition of the Christ-form, bears the task initiated by Jesus, and can also be identified as "the life." This is because in the Christian tradition, one is given the story of Christ and thus the most powerful Language, enabling one to discern Meaning in every Experience—even, and especially, the experiences of trauma and suffering. I would like to conclude by unpacking this claim in light of all that has preceded.

As I have suggested already, there is a significant difference between the Liberal tradition's storying of human life and the Christian tradition's storying of human life—what we can now call their respective anthropologies. And perhaps the best story to tell about the relationship between the two comes from Jesus' parabolic pedagogy itself, and in particular, the parable of the prodigal son.

Much like the younger son in the parable, the Liberal tradition is a tradition that takes its inheritance from its parent Christian tradition and ventures forth into unknown territories. Like the younger son, the Liberal tradition is motivated by a new desire for independence and autonomy, a desire to break free from authority of the Father and experience a world beyond the Father's home. Indeed, there is something reflective of the nature of all human life in this—to be human is to be a creature that ventures out of itself, that risks suffering the unknown, the unpredictable, the untamed.

But a problem arises when the Liberal tradition advances this venturing

experience as the most basic mode of human life, what scholars in the field of disability studies refer to as a “best case anthropology.”⁴⁷ The anthropology at the heart of the Liberal tradition is constructed according to those limited years, usually between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, in which a majority of human beings do indeed experience the initial thrill of prodigality and the independence and autonomy it brings.

The problem, of course, is what does this do for those denied any independence or autonomy, whether by circumstance of birth, unintended trauma, or the phase of one’s life? After all, to live a human life means to be far more dependent than independent. For an anthropology constituted on a foundation of total independence, those who remain dependent—the disabled, the young, and the elderly—stand as living critiques of this anthropology in their very being. They are seen as bearers of human weakness, which is why our world will always be haunted by the demons of eugenics—as living embodiments of the weakness of human life, the disabled will always be viewed by those subscribing to an anthropological story of independence and power as anomalies to be marginalized or completely eradicated.

For this reason, as Stanley Hauerwas has recognized in so much of his theology,⁴⁸ our so-called disabled brothers and sisters are the bearers of a power that alone can awaken our late Modern Liberal tradition from its ever-intensifying momentum toward the “best-case” anthropological story it tells; a story that is inherently alienating of the meek, the mournful, the marginalized.

And even though in its most recent progressive form, the Liberal tradition tries to integrate disability into its story, it is simply without the resources to do so, for it lacks the story of a God who reveals that human life is inherently disabling, broken, and weak, a God whose love therefore moves Him to assume trauma, suffering, and even death into Himself. Only the Christian story bears such a plot and thus only the Christian story can really do justice to the full scope of human life, which is indelibly bound up with trauma, suffering, and disability.

47 See e.g., *Disability in the Christian Tradition, A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 2.

48 See, e.g., *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas’s Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology*, ed. John Swinton (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

Does not the prodigal son come to such a realization when he finds himself shamefully eating the food he is supposed to be feeding pigs? Is it not at that moment that he realizes his grasping after a false sense of strength and power beyond his father's home that he becomes painfully aware of how disabled he is? And is it not at that moment that he also begins to construct a new story about himself, his Father, and his prodigality, one that at least provides a moment of metanoia, enabling him to take his first steps back home?

To be sure, it is not a happy story on any account. It is a tragic story in which the prodigal is no longer a son but a slave, capable of dwelling in his Father's home only under conditions of servitude. It is a story in which his Father is no longer a loving source of comfort and sustenance, but a stern judge who is all too ready to punish. Yet for all its demerits, it is a story that is strong enough to provoke the prodigal to begin the long, shameful return back to his true home.

While he is on that way home, even before he arrives, he is surprised by the irresistible story that the Father embodies and proclaims in his response – the Christian story at its most resplendent and glorious. It is the story of a Father's unceasing love even in the face of rejection and self-exile. It is a story that will eventually enable the prodigal son to come to integrate his prodigal trauma and suffering, indeed, his prodigal disability in the light of a love he could never have imagined. It is a story that gives him a language through which his experience as prodigal will reveal a sense of meaning he could never have anticipated but that now integrates his experience of prodigality into his fuller story of redeemed human life.

And so we can conclude with a final insight into Jesus' identification with "the life": Jesus is "the life" because he is the suffering servant, that is, the form of God who assumes even the disintegrating forces of trauma, suffering, and therefore all disability—the most alienating experiences in human life.

As the tradition of the Christ-form, Christianity gives us the Word, the language, that enables us to story those aspects of human existence that seem to disintegrate our lives. What can be more powerful than a story like this? To be sure, it is not that Christ and Christianity allow us to derive some kind of discursive or dianoetic meaning from suffering; that would entail a reduction of suffering's plenitude to explanation.

Rather, the God who assumes suffering in the person of Jesus Christ enables those living human lives to know that the pain and ugliness of one's suffering is never the end of the story. In Christianity, human beings are given the only Word capable of uttering what Leonard Cohen called a "cold and broken hallelujah"—a Word of adoration in the midst of degradation, a vision of glory in the face of humiliation, a vision of beauty in the fog of ugliness. It is a story that invites others into its telling and inspires diverse forms of telling. It is a story that allows one to become the bearer of God to and for others. Indeed, such a story enables us to take up Jesus' words in John 10:10 as our own—"I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly."⁴⁹

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49 John 10:10

POST-CONFERENCE REFLECTIONS

FROM STEPHEN C. MEREDITH AND BRENDAN THOMAS SAMMON

STEPHEN C. MEREDITH

Thomas Aquinas wrote that the truths, plural, that philosophy deals with are *the preambles of faith*. John F. Wippel commented:

By “preamble of faith” Thomas has in mind a truth concerning God or the world that can be established by natural or philosophical reasoning and that is in some way presupposed for faith or for making an act of faith. While such a preamble is not in itself an article of faith, it is logically implied by or presupposed for what is indeed an article of faith. As examples Thomas always cites our knowledge that God exists, usually also that he is one, along with other truths of this kind, a number of which he identifies for us in various texts, but without ever giving us a complete list.⁵⁰

That he never gave us the complete list of philosophical truths should not be surprising—certainly not in an age when scientists, among others, are accumulating terabytes⁵¹ of new data every day. Clearly, Thomas had read a great deal of philosophy—not only what he called natural philosophy and we now call “science,” but many other kinds—and was duly impressed. The philosophical truths that Thomas considered knowable by human beings in the absence of revelation constitute the Questions at the start of his *Summa Theologica*. We could *know*, he said, that God exists. To know this was not optional; to pretend otherwise was, as the lawyers now say, actionable. We could know, also, that God is good; that He is completely

50 John F. Wippel, “Aquinas on Creation and Preambles of Faith,” *The Thomist* 78, no. 1 (2014): 2.

51 Or maybe peta-, exa-, zetta-, or yottabytes.

simple, lacking all composition and complexity; that He is infinite; that He is eternal; that He is just; that He is merciful and provident.

The problem, however, is that we don't really know what any of these terms mean, starting with "exists," but continuing on to "good," "simple," "infinite," and so on. This point leads to what I referred to in my essay as the *via negativa* (in theology, also sometimes called apophatic), in which Thomas harkens to a long tradition that includes Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. We know of God's simplicity, for example, only by comparison with what we observe in the world, which is (for corporeal beings) a composite of form with matter.

As I also mentioned, for the optimistic Thomas, it would be impossible for our natural desire to know the first cause of things to remain void, so the *via negativa* implies the existence of a *via positiva* (in theology, sometimes called cataphatic). That philosophy—knowledge obtained through the use of reason unaided by revelation—is a *preamble* to anything implies that there is *something that it can lead to* (under the right circumstances), which is faith.

But this leaves us to face what seems to be an unsolvable problem, which can be stated, in a nutshell, as follows: if we're so damn smart that we can do philosophy, why should we believe anything that cannot be proven?

This is exactly the problem David Foster Wallace tackles in *Infinite Jest*. In a mere 500 words (or so) one can, at most, give a synopsis of one example of how Wallace illustrated this problem, and for this purpose I will use the story of one character, Don Gately. The book has a complicated plot (a gross understatement) and a zillion characters (not an exaggeration), but to summarize: Don Gately is an absolutely enormous man with a gruff exterior but a kind heart; he was raised under horrific circumstances and became a Demerol and Talwin addict (though he started with alcohol) and a part-time burglar. He lands in a world of trouble, legal and other, but manages to transcend his circumstances. His efforts are heroic, though this statement requires an asterisk. It's a long story, but he manages to attain a prolonged and ongoing stretch of sobriety and become a counselor in residence at Ennet House, a halfway house for addicts. His heroism is not only in protecting his charges, including taking a bullet for one of them;

even more, it is his internal and psychological conquests that make him heroic.⁵² Near the end of the (thoroughly non-linear) time frame of the novel, Don Gately is lying in a hospital bed, with a critical gunshot injury, flitting into and out of consciousness, pondering the trajectory of his life. His heroism includes refusing to take even prescribed drugs, for fear of being dragged back into substance addiction, the “Disease,” the “Spider.”

To the extent that he has gotten his life straightened out, he clearly owes a lot to AA and similar organizations, which at first he attended not by choice but by force. The problem he encountered right away was that AA requires surrender to what they call a “Higher Power,” but this is clearly a circumlocution for God. Gately’s problem was that he had no concept, not even a rudimentary one, of anything like a Higher Power. When he was forced to get down on his knees at meetings, he found it humiliating to pray to something he didn’t believe in. When it was his turn to speak at one of the AA meetings—the *Tough Shit But You Still Can’t Drink* group, made up mostly of bikers—he let it be known how much he hated the whole praying to a Higher Power thing: “at this point the God-understanding stuff kind of makes him want to puke, from fear. Something you can’t see or hear or touch or smell: OK. All right, something you can’t even *feel*? Because that’s what he feels when he tries to understand something to really sincerely pray to. Nothingness.”⁵³

Part of Don Gately’s problem with believing is that at the point in his life when he “hits bottom”—one of many AA clichés that Gately hated—he had already been, for a very long time, “a gifted cynic, with a keen bullshit-antenna.”⁵⁴ It is the damn hipness, coolness, smug knowingness that gets in his way: he finds belief to be trite, a cliché, just a lot of stupid bullshit. The objections he raises are far from novel, and probably had been raised by many of his predecessors in Ennet House and AA. He

52 As I argue elsewhere, Wallace shares a lot with James Joyce, in his style and his conception of heroism, among other things. Don Gately is heroic much as Leopold Bloom is heroic (if he is) in *Ulysses*: not through any literal slaying of usurpers, like Odysseus, but through internal and psychological conquests.

53 David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 444.

54 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 356.

asked, “How do trite things get to be trite? Why is the truth usually not just un- but anti-interesting?”⁵⁵

But these skeptical, hip-cool-knowing questions give a hint of something else. When he talks about triteness, he has also already come a long way, for he has recognized that the truth is “not just un- but anti-interesting”—meaning that he has, if only partially and tentatively, recognized truth as truth. The previous quote speaks to “Nothingness,” but this too is a kind of progress for him, for we also read:

He says when he tries to pray he gets this like image in his mind’s eye of the brainwaves or whatever of his prayers going out and out, with nothing to stop them, going, going, radiating out into like space and outliving him and still going and never hitting Anything out there, much less something with an ear that could possibly give a rat’s ass.⁵⁶

Gately, who is not well educated, does not know this, but the metaphor he used was quite similar to the one with which Blaise Pascal described the universe: “Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie!”⁵⁷

How Gately finally arrives at a tenuously better place is a major subplot in this novel, which is well worth reading, even if you do not have a year to spare. The point, for now, is that the novel seems to represent Wallace’s quest for authenticity, for sincerity, as opposed to the all-pervasive irony and “hipness” that he found to be ubiquitous in American culture,⁵⁸ but particularly in postmodern literature. This is a story—an important one—for another day.

There is one more point to make about Gately’s story, and that is that his skepticism (to put a word onto it) about all that God/Higher Power stuff was not just ironical hipness: it was also based on what he saw in the world in general, and in his own hellacious life in particular. Not

55 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 358.

56 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 444.

57 “The eternal silence in those infinite spaces makes me afraid!” Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 206-201, (Texte Édité par Léon Brunschvicg, Garnier Flammarion, 1976, Paris), 110.

58 Not necessarily only American culture.

that this forms a justification for his deeds, some of which were wicked (even though they were never *malicious*), but he did have a very hard time growing up. He was abused starting (as he put it, characteristically) by his “like organic” father while he was “still in his mother’s stomach.”⁵⁹ His mother was clearly an alcoholic: “To the extent it’s Gately’s place to diagnose anybody else as an alcoholic, his mom was pretty definitely an alcoholic. She drank Stolichnaya vodka in front of the TV.”⁶⁰ Don would soon be joining her in drinking, after she passed out, ostensibly to prevent her from drinking too much, but it is hardly a leap to say that he was self-medicating his own depression. In between the drinking, his step-father would abuse his mother, and if Don tried to intervene, he would turn his rage on Don. And so it went until he not only became an alcoholic and a drug addict, and dropped out of high school, but was soon an enforcer (because of his enormous size) to a brutal bookie, and a part-time burglar—and eventually, even a murderer. If one wanted to tone this down slightly, one can add the asterisk that perhaps this was “only” second degree murder. Again, this does not exculpate, but it does help to explain. The point is: that while Don was in his hospital bed recovering from his bullet wound, flitting in and out of consciousness, he asks this very pertinent question:

it's a bit hard to see why a quote Loving God would have him go through the sausage-grinder of getting straight just to lie here in total discomfort and have to say no to medically advised Substances and get ready to go to jail just because Pat M. doesn't have the brass to make these selfish bottom-feeding dipshits stand up and do the right thing for once.⁶¹

This is the Problem of Evil, and as Hans Kung said, quoting Georg Büchner, the problem of evil is the rock upon which atheism is founded. Gately has suffered.

59 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 446.

60 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 446.

61 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 894.

To come back to where these reflections started: the story for us *now* is a question. If philosophy is a preamble to faith, how does one ever get to faith? One can also ask the *why* question. Why would one ever do so?

Thomas Aquinas was always scrupulous in separating what could be known by natural reason from what could be known only as an article of faith. It was an article of faith, for example, that the universe had a beginning.⁶² Most importantly, perhaps, natural philosophy might be able to show that a skeletal God exists, for example, as the first and uncaused cause, but to believe in the Trinity is an article of faith. The Incarnation presents a mystery—for many reasons, but one of the reasons is that in it, a completely simple God enters into composition with matter.

Articles of faith involve mysteries, a word that needs further elaboration. Mystery novels, if they are any good, are not truly mysteries, because they can be solved by the application, as Hercule Poirot would say, of “the little gray cells.”⁶³ In contrast, a theological mystery is doctrine that defies explanation.⁶⁴ The word is derived from *μυστήριον* (*mysterion*), denoting that it awaits disclosure, but has not yet been disclosed. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997), the Latin term is *mysterium fidei* (mystery of faith), indicating that it is not knowable unless specially revealed by God, i.e., supernatural, above and beyond nature itself.

This point leads to a debate about whether there can be such a thing as the “supernatural”. When a physician is confronted with a seemingly miraculous cure (from widely metastatic cancer, for example), the debate will be whether such a cure is truly miraculous—occurring because of the direct intervention of God in the world—or merely very rare. There is a

62 When theologians and scientists use the word “creation,” they do not necessarily mean the same thing. The Big Bang is “creation” for most physicists. A Thomistic theologian can believe that the Big Bang occurred, but would not call it “creation,” since, if there was a Big Bang, *something* must have existed in order to bang. For Thomas, creation was *ex nihilo*, from nothing, of which a human intellect cannot possibly conceive. As Thomas wrote, “*Creatio non est mutatio*” (*Summa Theologiae* Ia q.45 a2); the Big Bang was a change, *mutatio*. See: William E. Carroll, “Creation and the Foundations of Evolution,” *Angelicum* 87, no.1 (2010): 45-60.

63 I’ve always been troubled by M. Poirot’s *bon mot*. The cells are not gray; the brain tissue, macroscopically and in aggregate, is gray (sort of).

64 Different religious traditions use the word somewhat differently. These comments refer mainly to the usage within the Catholic church.

difference: the difference is that a theist might see limits to nature, which only God transcends, whereas as a skeptic (not to fuss a lot about the right word) will see our ignorance about what is truly included in nature. Perhaps, the skeptic might say of a patient suddenly relieved of widely metastatic cancer, there was an anti-cancer immunological phenomenon that we didn't know about, in the current, primitive state of our science. We modern scientists look down our noses at the science of the medievals and ancients, but it might be that in the centuries to come, we will suffer the same fate. So it is entirely possible that what some of us take to be a miracle would someday be explained in fairly ordinary, naturalistic terms. If that occurs, the so-called miracle might not be a miracle at all.⁶⁵

But this, valid as it is, is beside the point. It is true that much of science proceeds by falsification, as Karl Popper proposed. Hypotheses are proposed and tested, and can be rejected if they are shown to be false; larger constructs, referred to as theories, can also be rejected under a weight of contrary evidence. Sometimes, as Thomas Kuhn wrote about Ptolemaic astronomy, for example, a theory is rejected not because it has been shown definitively to be incorrect, but because it has so many special cases that it becomes too cumbersome to use. An extreme Kuhnian might draw an implication that might or might not be valid: theories are devised while trying to solve pressing problems of the moment, but no theory is ever simply true and correct, for now and forever.

But again, these points, however valid, are beside the point. The point is that no scientist would ever spend countless hours pipetting were there not the prospect of Truth at the end of the tunnel. In other words, it would be pointless to do science—and here, we can extend the term to mean scientia in its broadest sense—without some belief that Truth exists. Or perhaps not belief, but only hope. There is an implicit article of faith in even the most skeptical science—and this is a belief, or perhaps only a hope, that the transcendentals exist. To say this may be only a *reductio ad absurdum* of a contrary position, but perhaps this is enough to keep doing science.

65 Or would it? There is an argument to be made that even the very “ordinary” laws of physics are a kind of miracle.

Brendan Sammon began his essay for this conference with a well-known Biblical quotation, John 14:6, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” It is not obvious what Jesus meant when he identified himself in this way. In my conference essay, I noted that we flail about whenever we try to define words like “life” or “health.” Attempting to define these words is an exercise in futility because we always end up with circularity in one of its many guises. Sometimes we define opposites in terms of one another—for example, health as the absence of disease, and disease as the loss of health. We similarly oppose life and death. Thus, the living are not dead, and the dead are devoid of life.⁶⁶ Or, when trying to define “life” or “health,” one resorts to synonyms, examples, and characteristics. These, however, are also forms of circularity.

Yet, as Brendan Sammon also wrote, glossing the Biblical quotation, “*that which cannot be explained can still be storied.*” As he noted, “The word explain comes from two Latin roots: ‘ex,’ meaning “out” and ‘planus’ meaning ‘to flatten.’ So, etymologically the word ‘explain’ means ‘to flatten out.’” But stories can add weight to discourse by being less flattening: stories sometimes say more by explaining less.

Although one might not think of scientists as telling stories, it is a commonplace to tell graduate students, trying to publish their first scientific paper, that it is important to “tell a story.” In other words, the data are whatever they are, but to talk to other scientists, it is important to say what you think the data mean. It might be the case that when a particular quantity of phosphorus is burned, it has combined with another, particular quantity of air to produce acid spirit of phosphorus; and that in this reaction, the phosphorus increases in weight upon burning. But it is a *story* to say that this is “what is observed in the *combustion*” of phosphorus—and that this process even has something to do with what mice and human beings also do when they/we extract energy from food by *oxidation*. Lavoisier told this particular story; but in calling this a “story,” I am not saying that this is therefore untrue. Quite the contrary, in fact.

66 Operationally, physicians need to make decisions based on such contraries, based on empirical data – even without purely *a priori* definitions of “health” and “disease”.

We should consider something that Thomas Aquinas said about the particular Biblical quotation given above. As an article of faith, one can believe it—or not; but what I want to note is its *consonance* with the biological sciences. After noting that Jesus started with the “way,” Thomas proceeded to write:

Because this way is not separated from its destination but united to it, he adds, and the truth, and the life. So Christ is at once both the way and the destination. He is the way by reason of his human nature, and the destination because of his divinity. Therefore, as human, he says, I am the way; as God, he adds, and the truth, and the life. These last two appropriately indicate the destination of the way. For the destination of this way is the end of human desire. Now human beings especially desire two things: first, a knowledge of the truth, and this is characteristic of them; secondly, that they continue to exist, and this is common to all things.⁶⁷

As Thomas said in this passage and many others, we come *from* God as our cause, but this includes our final cause; and our final cause, our end or *telos*, *why* we were created, is to *return to God*.

In his *Summa Theologica*, he also noted a commonality in all of life: “For it is clear that we trace a thing back to that in which we find it first: just as in this lower world we attribute life to the vegetative soul, because therein we find the first trace of life.”⁶⁸ One can object to the term “lower

67 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on The Gospel of St. John*, trans. James A. Weisheipl, O.P. (Albany, NY: Magi Books, Inc., 1998), Ch. 15, Lec. 2, 1868, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/SSJohn.htm>. Sed quia ista via non est distans a termino, sed coniuncta, addit veritas et vita; et sic ipse simul est via, et terminus. Via quidem secundum humanitatem, terminus secundum divinitatem. Sic ergo secundum quod homo, dicit ego sum via; secundum quod Deus, addit veritas et vita. Per quae duo terminus huius viae convenienter designatur. Nam terminus huius viae finis est desiderii humani, homo autem duo praecipue desiderat: primo quidem veritatis cognitionem, quae est sibi propria; secundo sui esse continuationem, quod est commune omnibus rebus.

68 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1947), Ia, q.39 a8, isidore.co/aquinas/summa/FP/FP039.html#FPQ39OUTP1. Manifestum est enim quod illi attribuitur unumquodque, in quo primo invenitur, sicut omnia inferiora dicuntur vivere propter animam vegetabilem, in qua primo invenitur ratio vitae in istis inferioribus.

world” as partaking of an old, possible outdated view of the natural world as a *scala naturae*; and furthermore, Thomas, in the thirteenth century, had no idea of the microbial world, and therefore could not have commented on whether the term “vegetative soul” would apply to it. Nevertheless, biologists, if they can be said to study *life* or *living things*, acknowledge, even if only tacitly, that there is a unifying entity called “life”.

Certainly in human beings there is a desire for “a knowledge of the truth,” as Thomas said above, and as Aristotle said at the start of his *Metaphysics*. The human intellect may well be special, but it did not arise completely *de novo* in human beings. We do not know how far back in evolution intellect goes; it is possible, as Thomas Nagel has suggested in *Mind and Cosmos*, that it is as old as the created world. Or, if one wants to be more restrictive than Nagel, consider this quote from Mary Midgley, who is citing “a remarkable passage” in Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* on the origin of morality:

On Darwin’s suggestion, the relation of the natural social motives to morality would be much like the relation of natural curiosity to mathematics and science, or the relation of natural wonder and admiration to art, or that of natural amusability to jokes. These natural motives do not of themselves create the arts and institutions that channel them. But they provide a certain appropriate motivational force that is necessary to create these channels, and they also determine, sometimes in surprising ways, the direction which that force will take.⁶⁹

Midgley cited “a remarkable passage”⁷⁰ (my emphasis), but this idea permeates a great deal of Darwin’s writings. Consider, for example, this passage from *The Descent of Man*:

Animals manifestly enjoy excitement, and suffer from ennui, as may be seen with dogs, and...with monkeys. All animals feel WONDER, and many exhibit CURIOSITY. They sometimes suffer from this latter

69 Mary Midgley, *The Ethical Primate: Humans, Freedom, and Morality* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 136.

70 In *The Ethical Primate*, Midgley cites Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, first published 1871, reprinted Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, Vol. 1, pt. 1, ch. 3.

quality, as when the hunter plays antics and thus attracts them; I have witnessed this with deer, and so it is with the wary chamois, and with some kinds of wild-ducks.⁷¹

Darwin, as usual, proceeded to multiply the examples many fold. He was thorough.

As for the other thing that Thomas stated all human beings especially desire, he noted that human beings desire “that they continue to exist.” He added, notably, not only that this is common to all *living* beings, but even that “this is common to all things.” This is to say, perhaps, that all natural beings, even inanimate ones, tend to move towards their own perfection and actualization. But to confine the discussion, for now, to living beings, this would seem to be one of life’s central features. As the brave article in Wikipedia put it—brave, because they actually undertook to write an article entitled “Life”—a defining feature in one popular definition of life is the drive towards reproduction. One can be almost pejorative about this, and speak of “selfish genes,” but this propagation or reproduction certainly seems to be a drive of a sort, one that moves towards an end.

In distinguishing what we can know of God through natural reason from what we can know of God by faith, Thomas Aquinas holds that much of the latter occupies the same territory as the transcendentals: that which transcends the other nine categories of Aristotle, and, as Thomas wrote, pertains to being *per se*. But he did not necessarily list all of the transcendentals, any more than he listed everything that could be known by either natural reason or faith.

Thomas explicitly listed five transcendentals, but, as both Brendan Sammon and I mentioned in our essays, there was at least one additional candidate, beauty, that probably also belongs on the list. As Thomas wrote, “Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally; for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and consequently

71 Charles Darwin, “Chapter III: Comparison of the Mental Powers of Man and the Lower Animals,” in *The Descent of Man*, produced by Sue Asscher and David Widger (1999), <https://gutenberg.org/files/2300/2300-h/2300-h.htm#link2HCH0001>.

goodness is praised as beauty.”⁷² In the spare, economical prose of his *Summa Theologica*, perhaps it was not necessary, and of course not possible, to say everything explicitly. Thus, in saying that goodness and beauty “are identical fundamentally,” and that the Good is a transcendental, perhaps he omitted to say that beauty is also a transcendental.

In any case, we might forget that when Thomas Aquinas was writing, and even more so before that, questions such as “what are the transcendentals?” were actively and widely debated. Maybe it is time to restart this debate. I would like to add “life” and “health” to the list.

On one level, to do so is absurd and wrong. If a transcendental is a *universal* property of all being, then clearly “life” does not belong on the list, for there are inanimate objects. In a sense, biologists can analyze only that which is not alive. In a completely different context, D. H. Lawrence wrote in *Studies in Classic American Literature* about Edgar Allan Poe’s “Ligeia”:

What [the narrator] wants to do with Ligeia is to analyze her, till he knows all her component parts, till he has got her all in his consciousness. She is some strange chemical salt which he must analyze out in the test-tubes of his brain... It is like the analysis of protoplasm. You can only analyze dead protoplasm, and know its constituents. It is a death-process.⁷³

While this is a perceptive comment about Poe’s short story, this is too grim a view of knowledge in general. Is it really the case, as he said elsewhere in the same essay, that “to *know* a living thing is to kill it”?⁷⁴ But on the mundane level of the everyday activities of a laboratory in the biological sciences, analysis (chemical analysis of a cell, for example) is destructive. Biology might study living things, and overall serve life, but in analyzing living beings it often treats them as not alive or renders them so.

72 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia q.5 a.4, reply to Obj, 1. Pulchrum et bonum in subiecto quidem sunt idem, quia super eandem rem fundantur, scilicet super formam, et propter hoc, bonum laudatur ut pulchrum.

73 D.H. Lawrence, “Chapter 6: Edgar Allan Poe,” in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/LAWRENCE/dhlch06.htm>.

74 D.H. Lawrence, “Chapter 6: Edgar Allan Poe.”

In another sense, however, one might be able to add “life” to the list of transcendentals, because what matters is not necessarily an individual part, but the ensemble. A cell or an organ of our bodies is not alive by itself or *per se*; it is alive only by virtue of being joined to a whole living being. So too I would say of our world. There are parts in it that are not alive, but it is also the case that we inhabit a living planet, and this planet is part of a living universe.

Thus, to answer my own question: this is the sense in which even a biologist can believe in the existence of life.

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BRENDAN THOMAS SAMMON

Of the many insights that were brought to light by the scholars at this conference, the connection between life and language not only stood out, but was often repeated, though at times in subtle ways. Hans Urs von Balthasar once noted that all good theology demands attention to two fundamental foundations: history and metaphysics. Both bear a significant relation to language: metaphysics, when done well (it is, *pace* Heidegger, done in many and diverse ways after all) is a rendering of the “language of Being,” as it were, into the various forms and symbols that language uses as a means of communication; history, though always necessarily done in partial ways given the limits of human perspective, can be understood as the emergence of what Being has already spoken. As both Charles Yang and Jonathan Tran so incisively articulated, life is nothing if not a “festival” of the linguistic.

The conference opened with Celia Deanne-Drummond’s reflections on life and compassion. It is obvious to state that both “life” and “compassion” are words, that is, linguistic symbols whose phonemic content bring to attention phenomena that, in themselves, exceed the strict linguistic limits of their articulation. It is less obvious that this excess opens to a more primordial linguistic form whose intelligible content arrives, not from utterances only, but from a performance, or participation, in these phenomena. As I have learned well as a care-giver to a child with Down Syndrome, one may speak the language of compassion without ever saying a word. As this conference has illuminated, one may recognize the same dynamic with respect to life itself—life as language begins prior to its arrival in worded forms, yet remains profoundly linguistic.

Jonathan Lunine and Marie George discussed extra-terrestrial forms of intelligence (ETIs), generating, among other interesting ideas, a debate about whether there could be ETIs that would be completely incapable of communicating with us. When one considers the isomorphic relationship between language and being—as any effective metaphysics ought to do—it seems to verify the position against an absolute equivocation between any linguistic worlds. Insofar as Kant was right to recognize that time and space are the two fundamental intuitions of all thought, it would seem to follow that any ETI would still have to rely on the categorical

elements of temporal and spatial experience, whether interpreted in a Kantian or Aristotelian framework, in order to communicate at all. And if it is the case that all communication requires some appeal to the basic categorical forms—forms of being that are more particularized or restricted than being itself (quantity, quality, relation, habitus, time when, place where, etc.)—does it not also reveal a similar foundation for life?

In certain traditions of metaphysical thought, the transcendental properties of existence were considered to be those modes of being that, transcending the categories, were as extensive as Being itself differing only in how they were understood (*secundum rationem*, to use Scholastic language). They are transcendentals because they transcend all categories as participating in them, expressing something that follows upon every being. They are in many ways the very form of language itself before language becomes worded: a thing can only be “worded” insofar as

- 1) it is a “thing” that can be affirmed;
- 2) it is “one” in that it is not divided from itself;
- 3) it is “something” in that it is divided from every other being;
- 4) it is “good” as being an object desired or appetible;
- 5) it is “true” in that it is conformable to the soul’s intellective power;
and
- 6) it is “beautiful” in that desire for it can become cognitive in the first place. Might human intelligence, indeed might human life itself, be similar in content to something akin to the transcendentals?

Aquinas maintained that in the act of knowing, based upon the principle *cognitum est in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis* (the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower) every act of human knowing is an act that overcomes an ontological disproportion between the human intellect and the thing known. When human beings know a thing, they in effect elevate that thing to a higher ontological status: from a mere thing in its putative neutral “thereness,” to a “thing known” now taking on a new life in the mind of the knower. This framework, however, only applies to those knowable objects that are ontologically “below” the human intellect and so capable of undergoing a process of “abstraction” from a thing into a new “ideal-life-form” within the limits

of linguistic concepts and categories so essential to human thought. In contrast, the transcendental properties of being (thing, one, something, good, true, etc.) can only be known by participation. In other words, the human intellect is incapable of examining these phenomena from the observable perch that “abstraction” provides and so cannot know these as mere objects in the world. In part, this is why Stephen Meredith is right to point out the limits that all dictionary definitions of life will bear—no positive concept can capture the essence of life. Rather, the best we can do is define life, as we do with God, by saying what life is not, or by articulating it as the absence of those forces antithetical to life. Moreover, we can perform, or participate in, life to most effectively and intimately come to know it.

Anne Foerst and Noreen Herzfeld’s fascinating reflections on artificial intelligence resonated in many ways with some of the implications of the categorical/transcendental distinction. For if it is the case that human beings can never finally duplicate human intelligence, it would seem to verify the idea that intelligence is much more like a transcendental property of being than a lesser knowable object. Dialectically, we come to a better understanding of human intelligence precisely by becoming more attentive to our own inabilities to master it. In similar ways, it is often the case that where the wording of language fails, something linguistically in excess is coming to light that requires submission rather than mastery. This is one reason that many of our shared beliefs are social, held together not by the clarity of an “objectivity” easily worded, but by what Peter Berger referred to as a “plausibility structure”—the contingent network of truth whose plausibility is largely dependent on our shared experiences of that truth. What new insights into intelligence and indeed into life itself might be achieved when examined through the framework of the plausibility structure?

Such a question was in part the focus of both Eric Turkheimer and Dylan Belton, who viewed life from psychological and sociological perspectives. For both the life of the psyche and the Umwelt, language becomes the bearer of living content. Language constitutes the sort of plausibility structure enabling a “psychic life” to emerge within the personal-centered nature of one’s Umwelt. Indeed, both approaches seem to shed much light on the dependency of life upon language.

Insofar as this conference confirmed the indelible intimacy between life and language, it also confirmed the efficacy of an approach to life that stories it within the Christian tradition. As “the life” Christ identifies the “Word” that illuminates life’s myriad intelligibilities. Christ does so in a way that not only requires diverse tellings of this story but that also enables one to see the Christ-form in the stories of other faith traditions—not, to be sure, in some Rahnerian “anonymous Christian” sense, which suffers from reducing Christ to a category imposed upon otherness, but in the sense of Christ as a transcendental: recognizing the Christ-form as a plenitude, or fullness of intelligibility, the Christian recognizes the need for other storying forms in their integrity (rather than as surrogate Christ-stories) to do justice to the Christ-fullness. Like Christ, life as language is a fullness that not only invites, but requires, diverse speakings to do it justice.