



Theology as Straw: An Essay on Wittgenstein and Aquinas

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The miracles of nature . . . (The blossom, just opening out. What is *marvelous* [*herrlich*] about it?) We say: “Look, how it’s opening out!” [CV, p. 64]¹

Just let nature speak & acknowledge only *one* thing higher . . . [CV, p. 3]

[I]f one thinks of God as creator, must the conservation of the universe not be a miracle just as great as its creation, – yes, aren’t the two one and the same? [PPO, p. 215]

I want to connect those three passages from Wittgenstein with two of the “*great, essential problems*”² that were of seminal importance for Aquinas, and indeed for many of his ancient and medieval predecessors: *What is the being (esse) of beings (entia)? Why anything at all?*

The Presocratic “physicists” who founded the western philosophical tradition must have marveled at the sheer being of the dynamic, ever-changing world around them, asking what makes *it* to be what it is essentially, and answering: *phusis*, i.e., nature. Whatever exists by nature has come to be from preexistent materials, develops “in accordance with its nature,” and finally perishes. The marvel of the blossoming flower is a good metaphor for the wonder out of which our western philosophical tradition developed. But is the being of what exists by nature to be equated with *being as such*? Aristotle’s

¹ “*Die sich öffnende Blüte . . .*” I think the German of this remark from *Culture and Value* better conveys what I take to be its intended sense, namely that of the blossom opening up out of its own *phusis* — its own intrinsic principle of motion and rest,” as Aristotle called it.

On the abbreviations I use for the Wittgenstein texts, see “References.”

² “[T]he old conception – roughly that of the (great) western philosophers – [was that] there were two sorts of problem in the scientific [*wissenschaftlichen*] sense: essential, great, universal, & inessential, as it were accidental, problems. Our conception on the contrary is that there is no *great, essential problem* in the scientific sense” (CV, p. 20).

answer was *no*. For, in addition to works of art, whose being depends on what exists by nature, there must (to borrow Wittgenstein's phrase) be "one thing higher." This answer was of course seconded and deepened by his greatest disciple, St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas also argued that the one *supernatural* (world-transcending) reality on whose being everything else always depends, could only be "Subsistent Existence Itself", and then went on to identify this "*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*" with the God worshiped in the three great monotheistic religions.

This paper contends that a partnership (a *limited partnership*³) can be worked out between Wittgenstein and Aquinas, one dedicated to reviving for modern times questions that were center-stage for Aquinas and other pre-modern philosophers, but which have generally been "elbowed aside" in modern times. In my view, and I think that of Wittgenstein, our aggressively scientific modern Weltanschauung tends to underestimate the importance of distinctively "non-scientific" (aesthetic, ethical, and religious) forms of thought and inquiry – to minimize their contribution to a sound human understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we have our being.³

1. Viewing the World as a Limited Whole

The world can be viewed as "the totality of facts" (*TLP*, 1.1) – or as a single, limited whole:

To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole – a limited whole.

Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical. (*TLP*, 6.45).

If the cat is on the mat, that is one of the myriad facts making up that totality of facts which is the world. Seeing the cat on the mat requires good eyesight. But seeing the totality, of which "the cat on the mat" is a part, as a whole requires seeing an aspect of things not immediately apparent to the senses.

"It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists" (*TLP*, 6.44). The experience of this "thatness"⁴ of the world is

³ Although it is not my major emphasis, I do say a few things about the *limits* of any partnership between Wittgenstein and Aquinas in the course of this paper. One difference I don't touch on at all in what follows but want to mention here is that, unlike Aquinas (and even more unlike rationalists such as Descartes), Wittgenstein is dedicated to resisting the urge to defend what we do *absolutely* and *finally*. ("Nothing we do can be defended definitively [*endgültig*] but only by reference to something else that is established"– *CV*, p. 23. Cf. *CV*, p. 45: "What I am resisting is the concept of an ideal exactness...").

⁴ Although Wittgenstein never uses a word equivalent to "thatness" (a made-up word), I see no reason to think he would object to my use of it here.

the same as “the mystical feeling” of seeing the world (i.e., whatever is the case) *sub specie aeterni* (“as it were from a point outside it”), as a single, bounded whole.

In his *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief*, Cyril Barrett connects the emergence of monotheism with the dawning of this “mystical” way of viewing the facts of the world:

As long as the world was regarded as divided into facts...it was natural...that religion should be polytheistic...To limit the gods to one God entailed regarding the world as a single, limited whole, related as a whole to God. [p. 138]

The God of monotheistic faith “does not reveal himself *in* the world” (*TLP*, 6.432), i.e., among the concatenation of objects that make up the facts of the world; and so, believing in God entails “seeing that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter” (*NB*, p. 74). God is not to be thought of as “a being among beings,” comparable to one of the Homeric gods.

The monotheistic belief in a *world-transcending* deity comes to light (as I think both Wittgenstein and Aquinas would say) mainly in what monotheists are *not* prepared to say about him. Imagine a polytheist shaking his head over what his monotheist friend tells him about his faith and exclaiming, “I’ve no idea *what it would be like* for the God you speak of to exist!” The monotheist, if true to his faith, will not respond with a description of “the world with God” and a contrasting description of “the world without God.” For that would suggest that the existence of the God he believes in is a fact on the same level as “the facts of the world.” Wittgenstein puts this point as follows:

[W]e might say: There can be a description of what it would be like if there were gods on Olympus – but not: ‘what it would be like if there were God’. And this determines the concept ‘God’ more precisely. [CV, p. 94]

Although monotheists often talk as if their God were in the world, as if his existence were just one fact among others, what they really mean comes to light in the fact that they would reject any significant description of what it would be like for God to exist, as opposed to not existing. For any significant description would have to be of a world in which God just *happened* to exist, i.e., a world in which God’s existence would be part of the totality that constitutes the world. And *that* wouldn’t be the transcendent God they worship.

2. Seeing the World as a Miracle

“Viewing the world as a limited whole” is closely related to wondering at its existence, being amazed that anything exists. Wittgenstein,

in his “Lecture on Ethics,” refers to it as “seeing the existence of the world as a miracle.” And what he means by “miracle” here is, I think, captured in Aquinas’s definition of “a miracle” as “a *direct* work of God, unmediated by any secondary agent.”⁵

Aquinas points out that the word “miracle” is derived from *mirari*, i.e., “to be astonished.” The “signs and wonders” in the Bible are extraordinary events; anyone would be astonished to witness such things, or perhaps even just to read about them in a trusted, “sacred” source. They are *meant* to astonish and thereby elicit attention. Remarking that such miracles are, “as it were, *gestures* which God makes,” Wittgenstein adds the following illustration:

As a man sits quietly & then makes an impressive gesture, God lets the world run on smoothly & then accompanies the words of a Saint by a symbolic occurrence, a gesture of nature. It would be an instance if, when a saint has spoken, the trees around him bowed, as if in reverence. [CV, p. 51]

Of course not all who read about (or even witness) “signs and wonders” will respond to them as “gestures of God.” And, while Wittgenstein was not (unlike Aquinas) one to believe that such extraordinary things as are reported in the lives of the saints actually happen⁶, he did speak of the ordinary event of a blossom opening up as a miracle, “a miracle of nature” (CV, p. 64).

As commonly used, “being extraordinary” is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for being a miracle. But for Wittgenstein as well as Aquinas, a miracle is essentially *anything* that exists through the *direct* creative activity of God. So they would speak of the very being of the world and of everything in it as miraculous.⁷ “Seeing the world as a miracle” is consequently a matter of “seeing the ordinary as extraordinary” And this requires noticing a commonly unnoticed aspect of things — their “being”⁸ or “thatness.”⁹

⁵ See Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, p. 171.

⁶ “[I] can imagine that the mere report of the *words & life* of a saint can make someone believe the reports that the trees bowed. But I am not so impressed” (CV, p. 52). But on the same page we find Wittgenstein exclaiming: “Go on, believe! It does no harm.”

⁷ It seems that for Aquinas, the *miraculous* coincides with the *really magical*. An illusionist seems to pick a rabbit out of an empty hat, but only God (perhaps through a human instrument) could really do it. For only God has the power to bring something into being *ex nihilo*; any other coming-into-being is a matter of the transformation of pre-existing material.

⁸ “Being” is commonly used to translate Aquinas’s “*esse*.” Herbert McCabe explains that “it is the gratuitousness of things that St. Thomas calls their *esse*: their existence not just over and against the possibility that they might not have been part of the world (if natural causes had operated differently . . .), but their existence over-against the possibility that there might not have been any world at all” (“The Logic of Mysticism–I,” p. 51.) Compare “the gratuitousness of things” that St. Thomas calls their *esse*” with Wittgenstein’s emphasis in the *Tractatus* on the *contingency* of the world.

⁹ “It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical but *that* it exists” (TLP, 6.44). But compare the following from a 1937 journal entry: “A human being lives his ordinary

To view the world, or something in it, as a miracle is to see it as *created*, and to see it thus is to see its very being as “God at work.” Creation, as Aquinas was keen to emphasize, is essentially God’s continuous activity, and not, primarily, something God brought into being a long time ago. And he would surely have sensed a kindred spirit in the following striking entry from a 1937 journal of Wittgenstein’s:

It is strange that one says God created the world & not is creating, continually, the world. For why should it be a greater miracle that it began to be, rather than it continued to be? One is led astray by the simile of the craftsperson. That someone makes a shoe is an accomplishment, but once made (out of what is existing) it endures on its own for a while. But if one thinks of God as creator, must the conservation of the universe not be a miracle just as great as its creation, – yes, aren’t the two one and the same? Why should I postulate a singular act of creation & not a continuous act of conservation – which began at some point, which had a temporal beginning, or what amounts to the same, a continuous creating? [*PPO*, p. 215]

Compare that with the following from Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*:

[T]he being of every creature depends on God, so that not for a moment would it subsist, but would fall into nothingness were it not kept in being by the operation of the Divine power . . . // The preservation of things by God is not through any new action but through a continuation of that action [“creation”] by which he gives being . . . [*ST*, I. q.1 a.104]

Aquinas supplies this analogy (which I paraphrase): The being of creatures *is to* God (the ultimate source of their being) what light in the air *is to* the sun that gives it light. Just as there is no light in the air apart from the continuing action of the sun, so there is no world apart from God’s creative action. (Note that “light in the air” is a better simile for the world’s existing due to God’s continuous creative causality than, e.g., heat in a kettle of water due to a burner. For the water will retain for a while the heat it received after the burner is turned off, whereas the disappearance of light in the air is simultaneous with the removal of its cause.)

Aquinas would have felt very much at home with the questions from Wittgenstein’s journal, and responded to them in way indicated by the passage quoted above. These were, of course, very important matters for Aquinas. But we may wonder what importance they could

life with the illumination of a light of which he is not aware until it is extinguished. Once it is extinguished, life is suddenly deprived of all value, meaning, or whatever one wants to say. One suddenly becomes aware that mere existence – as one would like to say – is in itself still completely empty, bleak. It is as if the sheen was wiped away from all things” (*PPO*, p. 207). I can’t help thinking here of Heidegger’s encounter with “the Nothing,” and with Wittgenstein’s remark to Waismann that he could well understand what Heidegger means by “Being and Angst” (*WVC*, p. 68).

have had for Wittgenstein, famous or infamous as he is for his negative remarks about metaphysics. My suggestion is that he saw them as powerful expressions of a humanly important way of looking at ourselves and our world, one he felt to be misunderstood and unfairly marginalized in modern times. Had he not perceived (what might be called) their existential relevance, I suppose he would have rejected theological questions and answers as the “empty chatter” of metaphysical pseudo-science. (“A religious question is either a question of living or it is empty chatter” [*PPO*, p. 211]).

That the creation theology he championed is of no mere academic interest is not something Aquinas would have had to emphasize to his audience. But it is certainly something Wittgenstein would have had to emphasize to his. Imagine Wittgenstein presenting his remarks on creation to members of the Vienna Circle and following that up with a dramatic reading from one of the few books he seems to have cherished, St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. I’m thinking of the passage from Book Ten where the young Augustine imagines himself asking the things he sees around him, as well as Anaximenes’s “air” and the other Presocratic “principles of nature,” whether any of them¹⁰ might be the God for whom he has been seeking. When they answer *NO*, he presses them to tell him something *about* God, whereupon “they cry out in a great voice: *He made us!*” “My question,” Augustine explains, “was my gazing upon them, and their answer was their beauty.” Imagine now the following dialogue between *W*, Wittgenstein and *V*, one of the “scientific philosophers” in the audience:

V (*complaining about what W had just read*): But that’s just poetry! If Augustine’s claim is that there must be some being beyond the world that made it, then, if we are to understand him, we need to know what possible evidence he’d accept as disconfirming his hypothesis.

W: Be serious! Whatever Augustine’s doing, it’s *not* proposing an hypothesis!

V: So, are we to understand him as merely expressing the same feeling that could have been expressed without the “poetic” metaphysical jargon?

W: We might say that you and Augustine are speaking from the perspective of two very different metaphysical systems. But then we need

¹⁰ On the priority of ethico-religious practice (e.g., pious, ceremonial burial of the dead) over what is sometimes alleged to be its theoretical (scientific or metaphysical foundation, e.g., the doctrine of the immortality of the soul), see Wittgenstein’s “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough* (in *PO*) and also Pierre Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. According to Hadot, “one can be faithful to one’s choice of a form of life without being obliged to adhere to the systematic construction which claims to found it As a matter of fact, ethics – i.e., choosing the good – is not the consequence of metaphysics but [vice-versa]” (pp. 282–83). I suppose Wittgenstein would follow Hadot’s line of thought further than would Aquinas.

to emphasize that such a difference is no mere difference in ways of talking. There is also the difference in the way you look at the world and our problems.¹¹ I think the scientific-technological *Weltanschauung* dominating our modern civilization inclines us to belittle ways of looking at things such as Augustine's – for instance by calling them “merely poetic.” And that's an inclination I feel called upon to resist.

Whereas the *Weltanschauung* of modern science and “scientific philosophy” (i.e., logical positivism and much analytic philosophy) relegates aesthetic, ethical, and religious ways of thinking and doing to the sidelines of “the merely emotive,” that of ancient and medieval philosophy included them as central to the development and maintenance of a sound human understanding.

People nowadays think, scientists are there to instruct them, poets, musicians etc. to entertain them. *That the latter have something to teach them;* that never occurs to them. [CV, p. 42]¹²

[T]he use of the word ‘science’ for ‘everything that can be said without nonsense’ already betrays [our over-estimation of science]. [CV, p. 70]¹³

3. Explanations Come to an End Somewhere

Wittgenstein characterized his experience of the fact “*that* something is” as *mystical* and called it his experience *par excellence*. But it didn't, for him, pose a riddle to be solved (*TLP*, 6.5). Now Aquinas was surely no less profoundly struck by the “thatness” – what he called the “*esse*” – of things. For him it did pose a real question demanding some – admittedly extraordinary – sort of explanation.

If an apparently healthy person suddenly drops dead, that obviously demands a causal explanation. But what is it about the existence of the world that demands such an explanation? I think the gist of Aquinas's answer can be stated as follows: There is nothing in the world around us, or indeed in any reality we can conceive, whose very nature it is to exist; so there must be something “outside” the

¹¹ In a 1947 discussion, Wittgenstein is reported to have said: “[T]o call a difference in Metaphysical systems a mere difference in way of talking was quite misleading – like saying that the difference between two suits was a difference in tailoring. There is also the difference in . . . the way we look at the world and our problems.// [T]he characteristic of a metaphysical statement, insofar as one could be given . . . is the pseudo-empirical character. // [I]t was nonsense to say that theological propositions were meaningless — what we wanted to know was how they were used” (*PPO*, pp. 338–39).

¹² Gerard Manley Hopkins's “Pied Beauty” gives a powerful and appealing poetic expression to the same way of looking at the world that's abstractly expressed in Aquinas's *Prima Via*.

¹³ Contrast that remark, dated 1947, to what we find in the *Tractatus*, first published in 1922. See especially 6.53. (Cf. *CV*, p. 69: “Someone can fight, hope & even believe, without believing *scientifically*.// Science: enlightenment & impoverishment . . .”)

world (something transcending our understanding) that exists of its own nature and accounts for the existence of all else – and *this* we call “God.”

An interesting thing about this solution to “the mystery of existence” is that it doesn’t really get rid of the mystery.¹⁴ I don’t think Aquinas himself knew – or indeed even *believed* he knew – what he was talking about in speaking of “a being whose very nature it is to-be (*esse*).” But Wittgenstein – in contrast, I think, to most philosophers – would not see this as a defect. For him, the important thing about Aquinas’s “explanation” would be that – unlike ordinary, “straight” explanations – it may actually function to express, and indeed *deepen*, “the mystery of existence.”¹⁵

I propose reading Aquinas’s “proofs of the existence of God” not so much as attempts to refute atheism but as part of faith’s effort to understand itself.¹⁶ Seen in this way, their audience is not (or not primarily) religiously neutral metaphysicians but believers, believers whose God, *as contrasted with the gods of the pagans*, is “the creator of heaven and earth.” This biblical God is “the source of *all* being” – the Lord whose worship requires a grateful acceptance of the existence of the world as a whole, and the ascription of a measure of intrinsic goodness to everything it contains.¹⁷ The pagan gods, by contrast, were not thought to be the source of everything real; for although their worship was in part an expression of reverence for the elemental powers of nature and the human virtues of wisdom and courage, it did not include reverence for the *being* of things as such.

¹⁴ Wittgenstein might have spoken here of “a solution that’s not a solution.” Cf. *TLP*, 5.552 (“The ‘experience’ that we need in order to understand logic . . . is *not* an experience”) and “Lecture on Ethics” (on the nonsense [*prima facie* nonsense?]) of “wondering at the existence of the world,” as contrasted with “wondering that the world is *this* way rather than *that*” (*PO*, p. 41–42).

¹⁵ Cf. McCabe, *op. cit.*: “God . . . would provide the answer to the question: Why is there anything at all rather than nothing . . . ? I say . . . *would* provide the answer . . . because, since we do not know what God is, we do not have an answer to our question” (p. 50).

¹⁶ “[I] think that what *believers* who offered such proofs wanted to analyze & make a case for their ‘belief’ with their intellect, although they themselves would never have arrived at belief by way of such proofs” (*CV*, p. 97). According to Cyril Barrett, this was also Anselm’s conception of theological proofs. “[A]nselm was speaking to his fellow monks, all of whom believed in God, and, had they not, would have been unimpressed by his arguments (as would the fool). What Anselm was in effect proving was that believing in God involved belief in a necessary, all-perfect, eternal being, and that that made sense” (*op. cit.*, p. 99).

¹⁷ For Wittgenstein (in *TLP* and probably ever after), everything in the world is fundamentally contingent. (We, and our world, are all [in Chesterton’s phrase] *great might-not-have-beens*.) In her lucid and persuasive interpretation of the *Tractatus*, Chon Tejedor explains that “when one views the world in this way, it becomes a source of intense wonder that there should be anything . . . *at all* . . . This sense of the fundamental contingency of the world is, in Wittgenstein’s view, the source of all ethical value. Once one realizes that everything is fragile in this way, one comes to regard everything . . . in the world as an extraordinary gift – as something profoundly valuable” (*Starting with Wittgenstein*, p. 90).

In “Flag of the World,” Chap. 5 of *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton describes an attitude to the existence of world as a whole that I think brings out something of what’s involved in the monotheist’s “reverence for the *being* of things as such,” namely what Chesterton calls “cosmic patriotism.” The cosmic patriot’s acceptance of the universe is, he explains,

a matter of primary loyalty. The world is not a lodging house at Brighton, which we are to leave because it is miserable. It is the fortress of our family, with the flag flying on the turret, and the more miserable it is the less we should leave it. [p. 67]

Interestingly – especially in view of a similar remark by Wittgenstein¹⁸ – Chesterton refers to suicide as “*the sin*” and calls it the ultimate expression of “cosmic *anti-patriotism*.”

“[I]t seems to me that our attitude towards life can be better expressed in terms of a kind of military loyalty than in terms of criticism and approval” (ibid.). On Chesterton’s view, we are not to “put God on trial, “as if he were a moral agent subject as we are to rules of right and wrong. This is the view beautifully expressed in the Book of Job and forcefully defended by Aquinas. And – as suggested by the following lines from a conversation he had with Maurice Drury in 1951 – also Wittgenstein’s view:

Drury: I mentioned some passages in the Old Testament that I find very offensive. For instance the story [2 Kings 2:23–24] where some children mock Elisha for his baldness. “Go up, thou bald head.” And God sends bears out of the forest to eat them.

Wittgenstein (very sternly): You mustn’t pick and choose just what you want in that way . . . Just remember what the Old Testament meant to a man like Kierkegaard. After all, children have been killed by bears

Drury: Yes, but . . . ought [we] to think that such a tragedy is a direct punishment from God . . . ?

Wittgenstein: . . . That has nothing to do with what I am talking about. You don’t understand, you are quite out of your depth.¹⁹

I think Aquinas would pronounce much the same judgment on the way many recent philosophers frame “the problem of evil.”²⁰

4. Theology as Grammar

Even if we follow the common judgment that Aquinas’s cosmological arguments fail as the demonstrative proofs he claimed them to be,

¹⁸ “[S]uicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin” (*NB*, p. 91).

¹⁹ A passage from Maurice Drury’s “Conversations with Wittgenstein” quoted in James C. Klagge, *Wittgenstein in Exile*, p. 210. Klagge remarks that Wittgenstein’s “you are quite out of your depth” sounds much like the voice of God out of the whirlwind in *Job*.

²⁰ On this, see Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 103 and 131, and (especially) his “Letter from America.”

I submit that they are nevertheless of religious importance.²¹ They are particularly valuable as ways of connecting cosmological wonder of the sort Wittgenstein felt (“not how the world is but *that* it is”) with the God of monotheistic worship. Thus understood, they are contributions to what Wittgenstein calls “theology as grammar” (*PI*, sec. 373).

Chesterton is helpful in making out what it might mean to call theology a *grammatical* activity.²² In *Orthodoxy*, Chap 4 (“The Ethics of Elfland”), he explained how, as a child without any religious instruction, he developed a bit of natural theology for himself. He tells us that he wanted to have someone to thank, not only for the presents in his Christmas stockings, but also for the feet he put in his stockings every day, and that out of this desire he came up with the idea of (what he later learned to call) “the Creator of Heaven and Earth.” As perhaps for all devout believers, “believing in God” was for Chesterton “grammatically” (i.e., conceptually) inseparable from a certain “gratitude for the gift of life.”²³ But the “Giver” he came to thank functioned not as an *explanation* of his life—or not in the way generous parents accounted for the presents in his Christmas stockings—but as an expression of what he called cosmic gratitude. “Life is a gift; all gifts have a giver; therefore, there is a giver of life”: perhaps Wittgenstein would have preferred this humble, if obviously

²¹ According to Hilary Putnam, “what the traditional proofs of the existence of God in fact do is to connect the concerns of two salvific enterprises: the enterprise of ancient and medieval philosophy . . . and the enterprise of monotheistic religion” (p. 27). But he rejects, the view of reason implicit in the “proofs,” namely, “the view according to which reason itself tells us that contingent existence requires a cause outside itself.” He adds, however (I think, rightly), that we ought to acknowledge that the traditional view of reason in question “speaks to and expresses intuitions which are very deep in us, intuitions that should not be assumed to have been refuted by the modern scientific way of thinking.” From “Thoughts Addressed to an Analytical Thomist” in Patterson and Pugh, eds., *Analytical Thomism*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), Chap. 2.

²² For more on some remarkable affinities between Chesterton and Wittgenstein, see my “Chesterton, Wittgenstein and the Foundations of Ethics” in *Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 14, pp. 311–23.

²³ The gratitude in question is *unconditional*, i.e., independent of how “the facts of the world” shape up for an individual. This “unconditional gratitude for the gift of life” is of course comparable to the “absolute amazement” Wittgenstein talks about in his ethics lecture. Note that the “ultimate attitude” Chesterton characterized as “cosmic patriotism” is inseparable from this “unconditional gratitude” and “absolute amazement” (or “elementary wonder,” as Chesterton calls it).

Chesterton’s “ultimate attitude” differs not only from that of pagan polytheism, but also – and more radically – from Buddhist atheism. Paul Williams remarks that, while Buddhists certainly speak of gratitude to their teachers and indeed to all sentient creatures, “this ‘temporal gratitude’ . . . is radically different from the gratitude owed to God for existence as such.” And the goal of Buddhist spirituality, he continues, “cannot involve the sort of radical dependence necessitated by gratitude to God on whom, as Creator, one is always in a relationship of grateful dependence” (“Aquinas Meets the Buddhists” in J. [Jim, not Jerry!] Fodor and F. C. Bauerschmidt, eds., *Aquinas in Dialogue*, p. 116).

question-begging, Chestertonian syllogism to a rigorously formulated cosmological argument – preferred it because it's less likely to be read as justificatory in intent.

Wittgenstein's student and friend, Rush Rhees, remarked that “all theology can do is try to indicate, perhaps even with some sort of formal proof, what is the correct way of speaking about God.”²⁴ This echoes the view of theology Wittgenstein claimed to have found in Luther, that it is “the grammar of the word ‘God’.” On this view, when a would-be Jewish or Christian believer is taught “Know ye that the Lord he is God; it is he that hath made us and not we ourselves” (Psalm 100: 3), he is not thereby learning something about *God*.²⁵ Although that knowledge may come later, the immediate aim of the instruction is the “grammatical” one of imparting something of the use of the word “God” as it figures in the stories and teachings through which people come to learn the biblical way of viewing themselves and the world.

Theology needs to be put in its proper place as a *servant* of the life of faith, lest it become a deracinated master of the life it was meant to serve. Learning theology is to be thought of as *preparation* for actually engaging in the language games of worship and prayer, and for “experiencing the presence of God” in one's life.

For the devout believer the reality of God normally “goes without saying”: that there is a God is part of the system of reference in terms of which he assesses his life.

That, at any rate, is how I interpret Wittgenstein's view of theology. In referring to theology as grammar, I think he was implying that while it has its importance, in the end it doesn't matter at all.²⁶ Perhaps Aquinas had something like that in mind when, near the end of his life, he referred to everything he had written as *straw*.

5. Faith, Reason, and “Seeing”

Growing up in a family where God is taken seriously, a child readily accepts God's presence and influence because of his reliance on the word of his parents. Similarly, an adult marvels at “the starry skies above him” and readily regards the cause of such wonders as something transcending human experience. The first example is of an act of human faith, the second an act of reason – that is, of informal, non-demonstrative reasoning. Non-demonstrative as it is,

²⁴ Rhees, *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy*, p. 44.

²⁵ “The way you use the word ‘God’ does not show *whom* you mean, but what you mean” (CV, p. 58).

²⁶ Compare CV, p. 97.

since it exhibits no necessary connection between its premise and conclusion, the inference in the second example is to be ascribed to reason rather than faith.

Neither faith nor the sort of reasoning exemplified above could possibly ground the *kind* of certainty (*scientia*) attaching to what Aquinas, following Aristotle, called a “demonstration.” Although he certainly thought that demonstrative reasoning could make the truth of the proposition “God exists” compelling to the intellect (as it were, clearly visible to “the eye of the mind”), it is doubtful to say the least that he thought the reasonableness of the ordinary religious man’s confident belief (*fides*) in God depends on whether *anyone* actually has “scientific knowledge” that the God he believes in really exists.²⁷

It appears that, for Aquinas, *reason* (in the form, not of demonstrative syllogisms, but of informal, “plausible” arguments) in conjunction with *faith* (as trust in parental instruction and *consensus gentium*) are enough to make it at least *not unreasonable* to assent to the proposition, “God exists.” But he would add that, to be fully *reasonable*, the proposition will have to be assented to *sub specie bonum*, i.e., as something worth believing in itself, and not, say, just out of a desire to please others.²⁸

Would Aquinas agree that the kind of certitude characteristic of the mature, devout believer is grounded in something even deeper than human faith, informal reasoning, and prudential considerations (the promise of a deeper happiness)? I think so. This “something deeper” only comes, I would say, when, in the course of a devoted “practice of the presence of God,” the believer comes (“by the grace of God”) to *experience* himself and the things around him as effects

²⁷ “[When] you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God” (I *Thess* 2:13). As a Christian theologian, Aquinas took this passage from St. Paul as authoritative, glossing it as follows: “Now nothing is more certain than the word of God, therefore science is not more certain than faith; nor is anything else” (*ST*, II.2ae. q. 4 a.8). Of course this provokes the objection that whatever reasons believers can offer for taking what was preached to them *as indeed* the word of *God* will either undercut the certainty claimed for faith (by resting it on fallible human authority) or else be question-begging as an argument. (“St. Thomas would certainly agree with the Reformed [Calvinist] thinkers that the rightness of belief in God in no way depends upon the success or availability of the sort of theistic arguments that form natural theologian’s stock and trade” [Du Lac, *op. cit.*, p. 69].)

Compare *CV*, p. 52 on believing (*Glauben*) as submitting to an authority.

²⁸ Something may be needed to help motivate the potential believer to take theism seriously, as what James called a “live option.” This help may be in the form of a preacher presenting him with what Pascal called “reasons of the heart.” Or it may be in the form of the sort of life experiences Wittgenstein spoke of in *CV*, p. 97. (For a wonderful illustration from Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* of Wittgenstein’s remark “life can educate one to a belief in God” (*loc. cit.*), see John Cottingham’s “The Lessons of Life: Wittgenstein, Religion and Analytic Philosophy” in Glock and Hyman, eds., *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy*, pp. 224–66.)

of a transcendent First Cause. This was referred to earlier as “seeing the world as a limited whole. “ But is it really a kind of *seeing* or *experiencing*? I think Aquinas, as well as Wittgenstein would answer *yes* to that, but I’m sure they would want to sharply distinguish the “seeing” or “experiencing” in question here from both sense perception and intellectual apprehension.²⁹

Aquinas would also want to sharply distinguish *all* the “seeing” available to us here below from the “Beatific Vision” granted the blessed in heaven. (Now we see God as mediated by his creation; *then*, “face to face.”) For Aquinas, heaven just *is* the unmediated experience of the Divine Existence itself.³⁰

It is said that Thomas, in his final days on earth, was given, as it were, a sneak preview of what God had in store for him in heaven. If so, it certainly is no wonder that he was moved to compare all the theology he had written to straw. For “the object of the heavenly vision will be the First Truth seen in itself . . . [and] hence not by way of a [theological] proposition” (*ST*, II- 2 q. 1 a.2)³¹

According to his friend Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein thought he could imagine himself, after his death, standing, in some “queer” bodily form, before the Judgment Seat of God.³² He thought of himself as a wretched sinner and of God as a fearful judge. But it seems he never received that “redemption through Christ” he yearned for.³³ – a redemption that gave Aquinas the hope of a happier meeting with his Maker.³⁴

²⁹ See *PI*, sec. 49 and *PPF**, sec. 222 (on the “linguistic substratum” of certain experiences), *PPF*, sec. 232 (on “a modified concept of sensing”), and *PI*, secs. 400–01 (from which we can conclude that “coming to experience the world *as* created” would be a matter not of coming upon a new *object*, but of the dawning of a new way of experiencing reality. Cf. *CV*, p. 97 (“Life can educate . . .”), and recall how life and imagination transformed Ebenezer Scrooge’s world-picture.

*In the new edition of the *Investigations* by Hacker and Schulte, which I have been using, what used to be “Part II” is referred to as *PPF* (“Philosophical Psychology Fragments”).

³⁰ Aquinas believed, as an article of specifically Christian revelation, that God destined us for a happiness far surpassing the natural happiness of Aristotle’s virtuous man – namely the “eternal happiness” of seeing God face to face.

³¹ Cf. Wittgenstein: “[H]ow can I imagine the glorification [of the one who is truly just]? In accord with my feelings I could say: not only must he see the light, but . . . become of one nature with it . . .” (*PPO*, p. 181, dated 1937).

I suppose the place of all ethico-religious propositions, including the preceding, would be (at least for the early Wittgenstein) on the top rung of that ultimately dispensable ladder referred to in *TLP*, 6.54.

³² Rhees, *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy*, p. 227.

³³ See, e.g., *CV*, pp. 38–39 and 52–53.

³⁴ A version of this paper was read, and usefully commented on, at a 2011 Faith and Reason conference held at Oxford Brookes University. I’m most grateful to my home institution in Norfolk, Va., Old Dominion University, as well as to Oxford Brookes, for their generous support of my work on this paper.

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