CHAPTER 1

Homo Perfectus

Westminster Abbey offers an ideal location for studying depictions of *homo perfectus*. Over the centuries it has become, among other things, the most significant shrine in Britain for honouring those humans who strove for perfection in their lives across a wide range of activities and disciplines, starting with the saintly King Edward the Confessor, who established and endowed the early parts of the present building in the 1040s and who was then buried in front of the high altar.

Westminster Abbey was, between 1540 and 1550, also a cathedral, but finally it ceased to be a monastic abbey in 1560, under Elizabeth I, and now depicts itself as:

> Neither a cathedral nor a parish church, Westminster Abbey (or the Collegiate Church of St Peter, Westminster to give it its correct title) is a 'Royal Peculiar' under the jurisdiction of a Dean and Chapter, subject only to the Sovereign and not to any archbishop or bishop … a burial place of kings, statesmen, poets, scientists, warriors and musicians, is the result of a process of development across the centuries. [Westminster Abbey 2022a, quoted by courtesy of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster]

It has been host to all coronation ceremonies since 1066 and is still used for important civic and royal services, as well as holding regular daily services, but it is a shrine par excellence for *homo perfectus* – especially with the grave of the Unknown Warrior, with its large, black, marble, memorial tablet surrounded by artificial poppies that all visitors or 'pilgrims', as well as visiting Heads of State, encounter first as they enter through the west door, with its florid inscription:

> BENEATH THIS STONE RESTS THE BODY
> OF A BRITISH WARRIOR
> UNKNOWN BY NAME OR RANK
> BROUGHT FROM FRANCE TO LIE AMONG
> THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS OF THE LAND
> AND BURIED HERE ON ARMISTICE DAY
> 11 NOV: 1920, IN THE PRESENCE OF

HIS MAJESTY KING GEORGE V
HIS MINISTERS OF STATE
THE CHIEFS OF HIS FORCES
AND A VAST CONCOURSE OF THE NATION
THUS ARE COMMEMORATED THE MANY
MULTITUDES WHO DURING THE GREAT
WAR OF 1914-1918 GAVE THE MOST THAT
MAN CAN GIVE LIFE ITSELF
FOR GOD
FOR KING AND COUNTRY
FOR LOVED ONES HOME AND EMPIRE
FOR THE SACRED CAUSE OF JUSTICE AND
THE FREEDOM OF THE WORLD
THEY BURIED HIM AMONG THE KINGS BECAUSE HE
HAD DONE GOOD TOWARD GOD AND TOWARD
HIS HOUSE

Reinforcing this clear message – about God, King, Country and, at that time, Empire – the choir of the abbey sang John Arkwright's 1919 hymn 'O Valiant Hearts' ahead of the funeral service for the 'unknown warrior', which includes the specifically Christological words, much loved by the British Legion, but resisted by many clergy today for whom 'lesser Calvaries' is a theological step too far:

O Valiant hearts who to your glory came
Through dust of conflict and through battle flame…
While in the frailty of our human clay
Christ, our Redeemer, passed the self same way.

Still stands His cross from that dread hour to this,
Like some bright star above the dark abyss;
Still, through the veil, the Victor's pitying eyes
Look down to bless our lesser Calvaries.

Soon after seeing this memorial tablet – deliberately reflecting a twentieth-century 'culture of remembrance that was neither straightforwardly secular nor consistently Christian' [Wolffe 2015, 23–38] – visitors will notice the even larger memorial sculpture marking the burial place of Isaac Newton (1642–1727). There are over 600 memorial monuments and wall tablets in Westminster Abbey for royalty, prime ministers, politicians, soldiers, scientists, musicians, poets, authors, artists, clergy, and, in modern times, even a popular entertainer (Noël Coward is there). But the one for Newton is outstanding, both for its size and prominent location and for the exceptional human being that it represents.

The abbey depicts this as follows:

> Newton's monument stands in the nave against the choir screen, to the north of the entrance to the choir. It was executed by the sculptor Michael Rysbrack (1694–1770) to the designs of the architect William Kent (1685–1748). It was finished in August 1730 and unveiled the following year.
>
> The monument is of white and grey marble. Its base bears a Latin inscription and supports a sarcophagus with large scroll feet and a relief panel. The relief depicts boys using instruments related to Newton's mathematical and optical work. One has a telescope, one is looking through a prism and another is balancing the Sun and planets on a steel yard. Others depict Newton's activities as Master of the Mint (producing coin of the realm) – the figures carry pots of coins and an ingot (bar) of metal is being put into a furnace.
>
> Above the sarcophagus is a reclining figure of Newton, in classical costume, his right elbow resting on several books representing his great works. They are labelled (on the fore-edges) 'Divinity', 'Chronology', 'Optics' [1704] and 'Philo. Prin. Math' [Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica, 1686–7]. With his left hand he points to a scroll with a mathematical design shown on it (the 'converging series'), held by two standing winged boys … The background is a pyramid on which is a celestial globe with the signs of the Zodiac, of the constellations, and with the path of the comet of 1680. On top of the globe sits a figure of Urania (the muse of Astronomy) leaning upon a book. On either end of the base is his coat of arms, two shinbones in saltire, within a decorative cartouche. [Westminster Abbey 2022b]

The inscription on the memorial is in Latin:

> H. S. E. ISAACUS NEWTON Eques Auratus, / Qui, animi vi prope divinâ, / Planetarum Motus, Figuras, / Cometarum semitas, Oceanique Aestus. Suâ Mathesi facem praeferente / Primus demonstravit: / Radiorum Lucis dissimilitudines, / Colorumque inde nascentium proprietates, / Quas nemo antea vel suspicatus erat, pervestigavit. / Naturae, Antiquitatis, S. Scripturae, / Sedulus, sagax, fidus Interpres / Dei O. M. Majestatem Philosophiâ asseruit, / Evangelij Simplicitatem Moribus expressit. / Sibi gratulentur Mortales, / Tale tantumque exstitisse / HUMANI GENERIS DECUS. / NAT. XXV DEC. A.D. MDCXLII. OBIIT. XX. MAR. MDCCXXVI

Which is officially translated as follows:

> Here is buried Isaac Newton, Knight, who by a strength of mind almost divine, and mathematical principles peculiarly his own, explored the course and figures of the planets, the paths of comets, the tides of the sea, the dissimilarities in rays of light, and, what no other scholar has previously imagined, the properties of the colours thus produced. Diligent, sagacious

> and faithful, in his expositions of nature, antiquity and the holy Scriptures, he vindicated by his philosophy the majesty of God mighty and good, and expressed the simplicity of the Gospel in his manners. Mortals rejoice that there has existed such and so great an ornament of the human race! He was born on 25th December 1642, and died on 20th March 1726/7.

As with the inscription for the 'unknown warrior', the theological allusions here – *qui, animi vi prope divina*; *sedulus, sagax, fidus*; and *Evangelii simplicitatem moribus expressit* – are obvious and striking. This is *homo perfectus* … 'such and so great an ornament of the human race'.

What is so surprising about this monument and inscription is that they recognise Newton's striving for perfection across quite a number of areas that have, until recently, been largely forgotten. Fortunately, the Newton Project at Oxford University and, in particular, Rob Iliffe's 2017 revisionist book *Priest of Nature: The Religious Worlds of Isaac Newton* offer a much fuller account of his search for perfection. The Project states this as follows:

> Although Newton is best known for his theory of universal gravitation and discovery of calculus, his interests were much broader than is usually appreciated. In addition to his celebrated scientific and mathematical writings, Newton also wrote many alchemical and religious texts and he left many administrative papers in his role as Warden and then Master of the Mint. [Newton Project 2022]

It is also telling that the final section of Iliffe's book is entitled 'The Perfect Understanding'. What is clear from the rest of this book is that Newton's striving across these different areas was astonishingly assiduous, even if, to modern minds, sometimes quirky. Iliffe says little about his experiments in alchemy, for example, but he does note that they were ongoing well into his old age and that, in terms of chemical knowledge at the time, it was not impossible to imagine that gold might be manufactured, just as diamonds can be today. Given his ascetic lifestyle, it also seems reasonable to suppose that his motivation for conducting such experiments was more scientific than mercenary. Nevertheless, today, they do seem quirky.

Iliffe strives to convince readers today that Newton's theological investigations were not quirky. He certainly worked assiduously on them – engaging, for example, in detailed textual criticism of the Greek text of the New Testament and some of the Early Church Fathers. Theological investigation was evidently a very strong passion of his, yet, realising that the theological positions that he sometimes reached would be regarded as heterodox by the Church of England clergy, he was very reluctant to publish them. They were written emphatically for himself and for colleagues whom he could trust, such as John Locke, but not for a wider readership.

However, for a critical theologian today they remain quirky. Without the benefit of modern, scientific cosmology he was obsessed (like many Puritans) with establishing a chronology for Old Testament figures and a possible date for the Second Advent, pouring over Daniel and Revelation, and, like Locke, he had strong Unitarian leanings. Sharing Locke's passion for religious liberty, he, nonetheless, held strongly anti-Roman Catholic intellectual and political convictions (leading him even to become, for a while, a University Member of Parliament in order to oppose James II's Catholic innovations and, finally, to support his removal from the throne). He was, of course, living at a time of considerable religious turmoil, which some historians now term 'England's Second Reformation' [Milton 2021]. Yet it is difficult to see that, unlike the writings of Descartes (with whom he disagreed) or Locke, anything very much remains in his theological writings for critical theologians today to debate. He was remarkably industrious in his theological investigations and commitments, but he was no Aquinas.

Science, too, has manifestly moved on since Newton, with Darwin's theory of Evolution, with Einstein's counter-intuitive theory of Relativity, then with Quantum Physics which was counter-intuitive even to Einstein, and now with Hawking's strange Black Holes. Nevertheless, it is remarkable just how long it took for the intellectual world to conclude that some of Newton's understanding of the physical world was flawed. On a static understanding of perfection, Newton's assiduous work in science, alchemy and theology was not perfect. Yet, in context and in its time, it was difficult for many of his contemporaries to imagine how, in its entirety, it could be bettered, as the inscription on his memorial indicates. Indeed, it is probably still difficult to imagine an intellectual life that could have been, or will be, sharper and more dedicated. Iliffe concludes his book with this dynamic understanding of Newton:

> Ultimately, Newton's early life (to say nothing of his last three decades) was suffused with an overriding religious purpose. Convinced that he had been created in the Image of God, his scholarly life was in part an exercise in examining how he measured up to his maker. As such it focussed both upon perfecting himself and on understanding the works of God. Accordingly, he strove to make his life that of a godly man, avoiding the temptations of the imagination and it chief effects, idolatry, idleness, and lust … so that he could dedicate himself to studying the truths of Scripture and Nature … It was also this heroic intellectual labour that produced the monumental works in theology, natural philosophy and mathematics that survive today. [Iliffe 2017, 401]

Charles Darwin, who once considered ordination, lost his early sense of religious motivation (probably because of the tragic death of his beloved

daughter) and Stephen Hawking, despite his occasional use of religious analogies and his first wife being a Catholic, may never have had any religious motivation. Yet each of these seminal and naturally gifted thinkers spent decades of dedicated study striving to perfect their scientific theories, with the severely disabled Hawking searching heroically to the end for a Theory of Everything. It seems fitting that they are now buried next to each other, and alongside so many other examples of dynamic human perfection, within the shrine of Westminster Abbey. We may be impressed by their intellects (*homo rationalis*) but, as the memorial statues and tablets attest, it is their dedicated striving (*homo perfectus*) that evokes our deepest admiration.

Perfection in Memorials within Kent Churches

But is this just Westminster Abbey and is it just the collection of the extraordinary men (and, less often, women) who are commemorated there? Or can such sentiments be found commemorating more mundane individuals? Parish church memorials of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries readily demonstrate that they can and that perfection was especially attributed to women who died young. And within twenty-first-century newspaper reports, the friends and relatives of murdered children frequently depict them as having been 'perfect' and 'angels', although it would be grossly intrusive to give actual examples here of them doing so. Historical examples are safer territory, although the historian and theologian Ian Bradley recalls an occasion when a family wished to put the line 'I believe in angels, something good in everything I see' on the gravestone of their teenage daughter, but was refused permission to do so by the diocese of Chelmsford. He comments that: 'This decision showed not just pastoral insensitivity but theological cloth-headedness. As well as speaking words of hope to the grieving parents, it proclaims two central tenets of the Christian faith: a belief in angels and a conviction that the world that God created is basically good and everyone and everything has something of the divine within them and is not beyond redemption. [Bradley 2022]

There is, for instance, the memorial dedication in Chilham Church, 6 miles west of Canterbury, of Sir Anthony Palmer to his second wife Margaret, who died aged thirty-three in 1619:

> She was fairer than most women; wiser than most men; Neither, in her own opinion, longer than she pleased her husband, whose only daughter, by a former wife, she more loved and cherished, than most wives do their own.

> Few were so respectful of their husband, as she was of her brother. Few sisters so affectionately kind unto their brothers, as she was to her friends. Few friends (if any), so cheerfully ready to give council, comfort, or relief, as she was to the poor; upon whose sickness, lameness, blindness, her charitable hands wrought daily cures like Miracles; for which (no doubt) God blessed her with a threefold Issue (John, Dudley, Anthony). Like her thoughts, words, works, all perfect, masculine. Of which, although the blessed first (like to her pious meditations) stayed little in this World; the other two yet live, like those Fruits of her virtuous knowledge, her speeches, and her actions; still calling to remembrance the modest, awefull, and yet ever witty, pleasing conversation of her whole life, that never knew man's ill affection [or] woman's envy.

Once again, theological terms – 'Miracles' and the spelling of 'awefull' – are deployed to emphasise human perfection.

Two miles east, but a century later, there are several very similar memorials, clustered in the south transept of Chartham Church, to members of the local, albeit troubled, Fagg family. The largest of these was dedicated in 1746 by Sir William Young to his wife of just a year, the eighteen-year-old Sarah, neé Fagg: 'In the beauty of her person, the virtuous accomplishment of her sex and the loveliness of her disposition she was most truly excellent … of lovely form and most angelic mind.' The 1857 memorial to Ann, Lady Fagg depicts her as 'the brightest example by which life can be encircled' and a 1785 memorial to Elizabeth, Lady Fagg as 'lovely in her person, most amiable in her manners. Her excellent understanding could be equalled only by her benevolent heart and the delight and comfort of her family and friends.' Only the 1791 memorial to the patriarch Sir William Fagg matches these superlative, even angelic (note the capitals), dedications: 'The unsullied Excellence which invariably adorned this good Man and endeared Him to All, cannot pass without some Token of filial Love and Gratitude. He, if ever any Man, walked before God with a perfect heart [as in 1 Kings 8.61]. Full of good Works, He appeared to triumph in the Decay of Nature and to smile on Death'.

And 20 miles away in the opposite direction from Chilham, an impressive, life-size, recumbent memorial effigy in Hollingbourne Church, the work of the English sculptor Edward Marshall (1598–1675), was placed in a purpose-built side-chapel in 1638 by Sir Thomas Culpeper for his wife Elizabeth, together with a glowing inscription of her as 'Optima Fæmina, Optima Coniux, Optima Mater' – prefigured by John Donne's 1617 Latin superlatives for his wife Anne – 'Feminae Lectissimae, dilectissimaeque: Coniugi charissimae, castissimaeque; Matri Piissimae, Indulgentissimaeque' (a woman most choice, most beloved; a spouse most

dear, most chaste; a mother most loving, most self-sacrificing) – when she died aged thirty-three after giving birth to their twelfth child. Sadly, by the time that Sir Thomas died in 1661, the family – divided and impoverished by taking opposite sides during the Civil War and Commonwealth – simply interred him in the vault below without any dedication at all, let alone with a companion effigy of him asleep next to his wife.

Within this small sample of churches, unlike Westminster Abbey, it is mostly the women who are depicted as *homo perfectus*. The cliché 'never speak ill of the dead' might come to mind, but the depictions here are expressions of sentiment well beyond that. This is the language of dynamic perfection in word and deed – deeply cherished perfection – the language of bereaved lovers who cannot imagine how their beloved could have been better in life.

Of course, hidden behind this language there might have been some remorse, just as there appears to have been in the case of John Donne, with Katherine Rundell concluding ironically that his young wife had 'married the finest love poet England has ever known: but love was not, after all, enough' [Rundell 2023, 230]. The Fagg and Culpeper families were both renowned locally for their internal factions. Famously, the young Queen Victoria expressed deep scorn in her diaries for her mother when she was alive, but, once she was dead, collated a private folder of letters to her from 'Dear Mama'. Perhaps one or more of the men from Kent also exaggerated his depiction because of remorse for treating a wife or mother badly. Or perhaps their sentiments are more akin to the erotic language of the Song of Songs:

> I slept, but my heart was awake.
> Listen! my beloved is knocking.
> 'Open to me, my sister, my love,
> my dove, my perfect one;
> for my head is wet with dew,
> my locks with the drops of the night.' [Song of Songs 5.2]

These, though, are speculations, and all that we have now is their very public declarations of human perfection and love (alongside reports of friction) … despite the imperfections of love that surely even those of us who are otherwise happily married will know only too well.

Indeed, the possibility of some form of human perfection was enshrined in the service of Holy Communion in the seventeenth-century Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, with its opening Collect (omitted in the 1980 *Alternative Service Book* revision, but restored twenty years later in *Common Worship*):

> ALMIGHTY God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name; through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Praying that 'we may perfectly love thee', however, was not to be equated with the unique, salvific form of perfection attributed to Jesus Christ in the opening words of the Prayer of Consecration within this service:

> ALMIGHTY God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world…

Claims of Perfection in the Arts and Sport

How does all of this match a critically modified version of Aquinas' nuanced understanding of human perfection?

The first point to make, again, is that Aquinas accepted (as did Calvin much later) that 'absolute perfection' is possible only for God and not for human beings, since such perfection 'implies a totality not only on the part of the lover but also on the part of the one loved, so that God is loved to the extent that he is lovable. Such perfection is not possible for any creature but is proper to God alone, in whom goodness is found integrally and essentially' [Aquinas, *ST*. 2a 2ae. a.2 co]. 'Bonum integraliter et essentialiter' (*goodness* is found *integrally* and *essentially*) is a divine not a human quality. As Gaven Kerr explains,

> [T]he perfection of all creatures … will not be a perfection discontinuous with the nature of a creature. A man is not made perfect in the way that a dog is made perfect … a man will be perfected as a man – i.e., a rational animal capable of knowing the truth and loving the good. But the fount of all truth and goodness is God himself. [Kerr 2022, 101]

And individual humans will have differing natural abilities, aptitudes or 'gifts'.

Creaturely perfection, for Aquinas, was functional or dynamic, but God's perfection was ontological. On this understanding, the declarations of human perfection in the Kent memorials are not about ontological, absolute or static perfection. Given the ambiguities of love, they are declarations that are set in a specific context and time-frame of the unexpected bereavement of grieving family members. Likewise, the distraught friends

and relatives of murdered children today who depict them as having been 'perfect' and 'angels' need to be understood within the constraints of their context and time-frame.

Aquinas inherited and adapted a distinction between various layers of human perfection, not least from Bishop Ambrose, whose instructions to fourth-century clergy, *De Officiis*, informed them about

> the realities that we should seek, where perfection lies, and where truth lies. Here, what we have is only the shadow, here it is only the image; there, it will be the truth. The shadow is in the law, the image is in the gospel, the truth is in the heavenly realms … So, here we walk in the image, we see in the image; there, it will be 'face to face', where there is full perfection. For all perfection resides in the truth. [Davidson 2002. 1.48, 239]

In turn, Ambrose relied upon Matt. 5.48 and upon a (Christianised) classical tradition of the 'greatness of the soul' going back to Aristotle [Smith 2020, 111–12].

Scouring the arts and sports columns of *The Times* while writing this book has revealed just how frequently some of Kierkegaard's 'cultured despisers' still use the language of 'perfection', even while denying that perfection exists – a denial, of course, that presumes some notion of perfection. This was displayed wittily by the exuberant art critic and atheist Waldemar Januszczak, who, when writing about Piero della Francesca's fifteenth-century painting *The Nativity*, newly restored by London's National Gallery, stated that 'in art, as everywhere else, there is no such thing as perfection, but few have come closer to the state than Piero in his *Nativity*'. He particularly admired the balance, geometric foundations, perspective and brushstrokes of this remarkable painting, arguing that 'your mind is being caressed as well as your eyes' [*The Times* 4 December 2022].

Will Hodgkinson, also writing in *The Times*, but in this instance about Paul McCartney's performance at the 2022 Glastonbury Festival, captured a somewhat similar distinction between static perfection (where there are no possible artistic, or in this instance musical, errors … if that is ever possible in a human performance) and dynamic perfection (where, evidently, there are). Teasingly, he argued that if you want (static) 'perfection' then you should to go to Ed Sheeran, whose song 'Perfection' was then, according to *The Times* [30 November 2022], the top streamed song. In contrast, he maintained that 'McCartney's concert was filled with the ups and downs of life itself, and that is why it was one of the greatest concerts of all time' [*The Times* 27 June 2022]. This, for him, was 'truly memorable' and 'joyous'.

Writing long before Glastonbury 2022, Jean Porter, in an early contribution to *New Studies in Christian Ethics*, offers this helpful explanation of what may be happening here within a musical performance (which, she claims, is analogous to moral action that perfectly balances differing virtues):

> To be a competent performer, an individual must be able to follow a whole series of complex rules involving the use of a musical instrument (or the control of one's own voice), the conventions of musical notation, and finally, the extended and partially implicit rules by which the quality of the music is articulated. The difference between a competent performer and a good performer is that the latter, unlike the former, has some 'feel' for the rules of musicianship to what counts as good music, and is able to interpret these complex rules accordingly. The difference between a good performer and a genius, in turn, is that the latter is able to extend the rules in some significant way, even to break the rules in order to remake them, in order to extend our sense of the possibilities of goodness that music holds. [Porter 1995, 191–2]

Context and time-frame are also important in other mundane sport declarations of perfection in *The Times*. The Olympic cyclist Jason Kelly provided an interesting example of this when he was interviewed after retiring from the sport, having won his seventh Olympic gold (and a British record-breaking ninth Olympic medal) in the keirin at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. Having spent his entire working-life training as a cyclist, without any further qualification since leaving school, he is quoted as saying: 'I've got quite a narrow skillset … I know how to ride a bike really fast for a really short period of time, so this is one of the few places in the world where I can apply that skillset.' Asked what he would miss the most in his retirement, he says: 'I just get a buzz from the high performance process, that will be the hardest thing, I do love being part of it. I enjoy doing something to the tiniest detail, *trying to get it as near to perfect as physically possible*. But hopefully I'll get that from the coaching side anyway.' [*The Times* 24 February 2022, italics added].

This expresses very well a dynamic understanding of human perfection: extending an individual's natural aptitudes, it is highly focused; it requires very considerable effort and hard work; and it strives 'to get it as near to perfect as physically possible'. It also fits the 400 metre hurdler Ed Moses, often depicted as 'one [of] the world's greatest track athletes. He dominated his event in an unprecedented manner, winning 122 successive 400m hurdles races (including 107 finals) between 1977 and 1987' [Smythe 2022]. Yet he struggled hard before 1977 to find an event in track

athletics in which he could truly excel and has led a somewhat disjointed life ever since. However, specifically within this eleven-year period, it is widely recognised that he did, as with Jason Kelly, 'get it as near to perfect as physically possible'. Other hurdlers since have bettered his world record times in this event, but none has remotely matched his unbroken eleven-year dominance.

The swimmer Mark Spitz, who retired from swimming aged just twenty-two after winning seven Olympic gold medals at Munich in 1972, commented five decades later that 'I was lucky to compete at the highest levels. Nowadays a lot of athletes stick around for more Olympic Games because they need more endorsements. I'm happy I wasn't chasing myself in that way.' Spitz has never missed competitive swimming, saying 'I did everything I was capable of doing; I could turn away and say, "Hey, it couldn't get better than that"' [*The Times* 5 September 2022].

Spitz made this retrospective comment about having done 'everything I was capable of doing' and 'it couldn't get better than that' despite knowing that in 2008 Michael Phelps won eight gold medals in a single Olympic Games. For Spitz, in his particular context, seven was unprecedented and was and has, indeed, remained for him, 'everything' and 'couldn't get better' … in other words, perfect … and aged just twenty-two.

This is similar to a statement that the distinctly older, champion tennis player Roger Federer made immediately after his final match before retiring (which he lost): 'My career was never supposed to be this way. I was just happy to play tennis and spend time with my friends really, and it ends here. It's been a perfect journey. I would do it all over again' [*The Times* 25 September 2022].

Only one small change is needed to make Jason Kelly's comment about human perfection more widely applicable – the substitution of 'humanly' for 'physically'. 'Striving to get something as near to perfect as humanly possible' can fit, to some extent, all of the examples of human perfection in this chapter. It may also depict a vital characteristic of many successful business entrepreneurs. The late Italian founder of Luxotica, Leonardo Del Vecchio, expressed this, claiming that, in addition to an unstated Weberian work-ethic, 'I've always strived to be the best at everything I do. That's it.' [*The Times* 28 June 2022].

The television critic and humorist Carol Midgely also offered a definition of perfection very close to my own functional definition when reviewing a post-Christmas television comedy series, *Detectorists*, about two men using metal detectors. She argued: 'It's hard to see how he could have bettered it. As a study of the middle-aged male consumed by a gentle hobby

while seeking deeper meaning in life it is gorgeous, a light-touch anatomy of the human condition' [*The Times* 26 December 2022].

Most of the depictions of perfection in this and Chapter 2 are made by people other than the actors themselves. But in three of these examples – the athletes Jason Kelly, Mark Spitz and Roger Federer – it is the actors themselves who made a self-depiction of (near) perfection, albeit only once they had announced their retirement.

Iris Murdoch and Perfection

The literary critic John Bayley provides another telling example of dynamic perfection in his deeply affectionate memoir of his wife, the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch. She was not renowned for her domesticity, but he recalls a moment before they were married when he discovered that 'Iris could cook, and to perfection, just as she might have done all sorts of things superlatively well' [Bayley 1998, 156]. She decided to cook a meal for two academic friends, rather than take them to a restaurant, as Bayley had suggested (to his chagrin he was not invited to the meal):

> She took immense trouble. First of all she bought herself at great expense a red enamel casserole, a boat-shaped one with a close-fitting lid. It weighed a ton … A culinary-minded friend of hers who was partly Greek had told her this is what she needed to prepare the very special Attic dish called *stephados.* He told her that if properly done, which only very rarely happened, it was the most delicious dish in the world. He was a philosopher, a follower of Plato, but his real interest was in cooking and telephones … Iris took two days to prepare the dish … She allowed me to finish it with her, cold, the following day, and I honestly don't think I have ever eaten anything more delicious in my life. [Bayley 1998, 155]

The costly casserole dish was seldom used by either of them again, and was eventually lost in the muddle that was their home once married.

Bayley's passing reference here to Plato was surely intentional. Murdoch's chaotically delivered 1982 Edinburgh Gifford Lectures were finally published as *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, to great acclaim, just six years before Bayley's memoir was published, by which time they were both living with her Alzheimer's condition. The conclusion to Murdoch's magnum opus articulates both her love of Plato and her philosophical and literary understanding of perfection, quoting Simone Weil:

> 'At its highest point, love is a determination to create the being which it has taken for its object.' Here indeed [is Anselm's] Ontological Proof in its simpler version, a proof by perfection, by a certainty derived from love. The

> good artist, the true lover, the dedicated thinker, the unselfish moral agent solving his problem: they can create the object of love. [Murdoch 1992, 506]

It is not difficult to see why a novelist should reach such a conclusion. The characters in Murdoch's novels, wrestling with good and evil, were obviously created by her and had no independent existence before her. Similarly, she believed in Goodness but not in the independent existence of God and, with a mixture of Plato and Buddhism, she believed that:

> We live in an 'intermediate' world. Good as absolute, above courage and generosity and all the plural virtues, is to be seen as unshadowed and separate, a pure source, the principle which creatively relates the virtues to each other in our moral lives. In the iconoclastic pilgrimage, through the progressive destruction of false images, we experience the *distance* which separates us from perfection and are led to place our idea of it in a figurative sense outside the turmoil of existent being. The concept is thus 'forced upon us'. [Murdoch 1992, 507]

Theologians have noticed that, at this point, Murdoch did seem to recognise the independent existence of Goodness (which is 'forced upon us') and have even suggested that her conception of such Goodness is remarkably similar to Anselm's concept of God. It will be worth returning to this in Chapter 2 and then in Chapter 9. At this point, however, it might already have been noticed that Waldemar Januszczak's quixotic sentence – 'there is no such thing as perfection, but few have come closer to the state than Piero in his *Nativity*' – might have amused Anselm and confused Murdoch, by just as quixotically replacing the word 'perfection' with 'God' – 'there is no such thing as God, but few have come closer to God than X'.

If John Bayley identified a 'perfect meal', wine critics regularly search for a 'perfect wine'. Two wines, produced in Andalusia, were recently identified as 'perfect' by one critical source:

> A pair of Andalusian wines have received perfect scores of 100 in the prestigious *Guia Peñin.* These are the first wines to have achieved the top mark in the guide. The first is Alvear Pedro Ximenez Solero 1830 … The dessert wine is low in acidity, and is described as having 'a smooth palate, a short finish, and a soft mouthfeel' … The second 'perfect' wine is Conde de Aldama Amontillado 'Bota No' … It is described as 'extremely aromatic and has notes of toasted hazelnuts, marmalade, plum jam, and walnut husks. It also has hints of nutmeg and exotic wood. It offers a wonderful mix of spicey, sweet and salty.' [Hinojosa 2022]

Doubtless expensive, yet for some, but perhaps not all, wealthy cognoscenti apparently 'perfect' … or, perhaps more accurately, this may be the

sort of 'quasi-automatic perfection' that Pierre Bourdieu identified, four decades ago, when one social group develops a taste, for example, for a particular type of expensive alcohol, in 'haughty' contrast/opposition to some other group. Using a 1960s French survey, he noticed an 'apparently minor but very significant index of this opposition … in the fact that private-sector executives far more often keep whisky in the house, whereas the industrial and commercial employers remain most attached to champagne, the drink of tradition *par excellence*' [Bourdieu 1984, 305]. Once again, it appears that perceptions of perfection are contextual or, as Bourdieu would have claimed, they are a feature of socially embodied cultural capital, dispositions or *habitus* (the Aristotelian term that he, along with Aquinas, used frequently) – *du capital symbolique et culturel.*

Aquinas on Perfection

However, for Aquinas, as noted in the Introduction, there was a deeper theological level of perfection that is possible for human beings: 'First, so far as everything incompatible with *caritas*, i.e., mortal sin, is excluded from the will of man … Secondly, so far as the will of man rejects not only what is incompatible with *caritas*, but even that which would prevent the affection of the soul from being directed totally to God' [Aquinas, *ST*. II.IIae. Q184.a.2ad3]. The pious Newton evidently attempted to reach this level of human perfection in his daily life, as Iliffe makes abundantly clear. Newton was not just a widely revered scientist and mathematician in his lifetime, he was also engaged in public service (albeit sometimes considerably fractious in his interpersonal relationships), as well as being assiduous in private theological enquiry and maintaining a frugal lifestyle, as his memorial in Westminster Abbey attests in both its inscription and effigy.

Deeper still, Aquinas' distinctions about neighbour-love may seem relevant to the florid inscription above the grave of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey: 'First to the extension of *caritas*: if one loves not only friends and acquaintances, but also strangers and even enemies. Secondly, as regards intensions, which is manifested in the things a man will sacrifice for his neighbour, but [also] bodily suffering and even death' [Aquinas, *ST*. II.IIae. Q184.a.2 ad 3].

The word 'may' in the first sentence of the previous paragraph is deliberate. The inscription and the accompanying hymn 'O Valiant Hearts' were both written in the immediate aftermath of the Great War – a war that lasted much longer and proved to be more devastating than was remotely expected at its outset. As the historian Christopher Clarke concluded in

his seminal study: 'the protagonists of 1914 were sleepwalkers, watchful but unseeing, haunted by dreams, yet blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world' [Clarke 2012, 562]. Inscriptions and hymns composed in this war's aftermath also need to be set carefully into a time-scaled context.

Once set in its social context, the obvious hyperbole of the final lines of the inscription above the grave to a warrior who is, of course, completely unknown becomes more understandable: 'The many multitudes who … gave the most that man can give, life itself, for God, for King and Country, for loved ones, Home and Empire for the freedom of the World … he had done good toward God and toward His House'; and of 'O Valiant Hearts': 'Christ, our Redeemer, passed the self same way … to bless our lesser Calvaries.' Yet they remain hyperbole. They are also at considerable variance with the bleaker assessment of the religious convictions of most serving soldiers in the unique 1919 report *The Army and Religion*, itself based upon some 300 memoranda from army chaplains 'resting on the evidence of many hundreds of witnesses … from men of all ranks' [Cairns 1919, vi]. This report found a general theism or deism prevalent among the soldiers:

> The men of the British armies, however dim their faith may be, do in the hour of danger, at least, believe in God, 'the great and terrible God'. Most men we are told pray before they go over the parapet, or advance in the face of machine guns, and they thank God when they have come through the battle … in the presence of the most terrific display of material force that human history has ever seen men believe that there is an Unseen Power, inaccessible to the senses, which is yet mightier than high explosives, which knows all and which hears prayer. [Cairns 1919, 7–8]

Yet this unique report also found low levels of more specifically Christian beliefs or active adult participation in churches among a majority of the soldiers:

> To sum up a good deal of evidence we seem to have left the impression upon them that there is little or no life in the Church at all, that it is an antiquated and decaying institution, standing by dogmas expressed in archaic language, and utterly out of touch with modern thought and living experience … they believe that the Churches are more and more governed by the middle-aged and the elderly; they think ministry professionalised and out of touch with the life of men, deferring unduly to wealth … They say they do not see any real differences in the strength and purity of life between the people who go to church and the people who do not. [Cairns 1919, 220–1]

This is still quite a long way from Aquinas' theological understanding of neighbour-love. And none of the examples of human perfection given in

this chapter matches Aquinas' third concept of neighbour-love: 'Thirdly, as regards the effects of love, so that a man bestows not only temporal benefits on his neighbour but also spiritual ones and even gives himself' [Aquinas, *ST*. II.IIae. Q184.a.2 co]. Bestowing spiritual benefits on his neighbour, in relentless and soul-destroying trench warfare, might well have been the last thing on the mind of the unknown warrior.

In Conclusion

That level of Aquinas' concept of human perfection must wait for Chapter 3. This present chapter, using written depictions of human perfection within a wide variety of sources, has sought only to provide evidence that *homo perfectus* has been, and remains, an important evaluative measure of what constitutes human beings at their most praiseworthy. Even that eminently *homo rationalis* Isaac Newton, much admired in his life for his astonishing intellectual abilities, as the first half of his memorial inscription records (he is still reckoned by some to have had one of the highest IQs in history), was lauded in the second half rather for his wide ranging and assiduous application of these abilities and for being 'so great an ornament of the human race'. Difficult for humans to better that.

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