In Medias Res: A Defense of the Unseen, Absolute Reality

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Metaphysics—oft-believed to be an ill-pursued and antiquated philosophic endeavor—has its way of creeping up on postmodern\(^1\), everyday conversations. How is it that the question rarely is posed: Why is it even possible that \(I\), in my subjectivity and individuality, can speak to \(you\), an objective other?\(^2\) Modern thought separates the human mind from extramental reality. In doing so, it concludes that what one knows are one’s ideas, i.e. the medium through which one knows is also the end of knowledge; ideas are the *medium quod*. Therefore, not only does this simple question go unasked, but it also seems that an answer is not even expected. The fact that two *human beings* can come together coinciding in time and space to *communicate* the most mundane of messages (e.g. ‘It’s cold out today, isn’t it?’) no longer seems to be an issue worth considering; it is perfectly acceptable to simply assume this is possible and move on.

Yet this kind of knowledge hardly meets the Cartesian “clear and distinct” ideal so rigorously and religiously pursued after the fall of realism: idealism teaches that human knowledge begins (and ends) in the mind, which imposes categories (space, time, causality) on an otherwise unknown and possibly unintelligible reality. This disjointed way of thinking is not just an abstract, epistemological difficulty. The quest for clear and objective scientific knowledge has increasingly separated faith and reason, emotions and knowledge, belief and truth, and values and facts in everyday common speech. Nonetheless, people paradoxically accept these dichotomies while contemporaneously embracing their similitude on a deeper and more basic level. The principles around which people build and actually live their lives escapes the grasp of the Enlightenment Project. This paradox is skimmed over in many disciplines of thought or science and
instead serves as the springboard for other, presumably more important ideas and uses. But has this approach assumed too much? Beyond the questions involving the mechanics of language, the biology behind speech, the physics of time, etc., lie the foundations for such fields of study, the *sine qua non*-questions making conquests for expanding human knowledge possible and worthwhile. These questions do not disappear merely because it is popular to believe they do not demand attention. Rather, such questions *cannot go unanswered*; the real question is, then, whether the answer commonly provided is the one most reasonable given the evidence.

The reexamination of assumed knowledge implicit in the simple example of a predictable conversation should reveal the nascent tenets of the contemporary mind. This will help illuminate both the kinds of questions and answers that naturally spring forth from authentic interpersonal relations. Firstly, for the two people speaking, person A and person B, each must believe that the other actually exists. Person A needs to concede that there is a real being in front of him to whom he is speaking. Otherwise, he would be faced with the absurd possibility that person B is no more than an imaginary friend or a phantasm existing solely in his mind. Secondly, person A must also accept that there is an actual correspondence between his mind and the thing known, namely, person B. It is not enough for person B to just exist; in order for person A to sensibly engage him in conversation he must be able to know and perceive him accurately. For example, person A needs to use the sensory data available (he recognizes person B, sees him respond to his questioning) to know that the idea he has of person B truly relates to the way person B is.
Thirdly, person A and B must trust that they share some common experience between them. Somehow, they must meet each other halfway in the conversation and assume that the other person is having a similar experience. They also must rely on a shared ontology of meaning within their experiences more generally, in order to make determinations such as the fact that it is cold outside today consequential. Without regard to these three assumed components of the conversation, borrowing categories from metaphysics, epistemology, and contextual aspects of experience, the whole notion of person A and person B conversing would be absurd and/or impossible. It is clear, then, that there are many more presuppositions that one must hold before simply speaking to another human being than are readily apparent to even the well-trained intellect.

There seems to be a fundamental contradiction in the principles necessary to hold the abovementioned conversation versus those principles that are present in common culture and intellectual discourse. Some of the most influential ideas prevalent in current Western thought are polemically opposed to these common-sense impressions. Cartesian dualism, for example, severs ties between the knower and the thing known while redefining human beings as “thinking things.” In everyday life, the gulf Descartes created between the mind and body results in a lack of understanding of the true integration of the human person. This division becomes manifest in the modern idea that it is possible to control one’s thinking separate from the habits developed through the body, as if an influence that is bad for one can be shielded from the other. The misguided perception that man is somehow ‘pure will’ and ‘pure intellect’ has had ongoing damaging effects. The impact of culture and society on an individual, for example, are sometimes underestimated, leading people to believe they can have a ‘private’ morality
under their intellectual control and detached from a common virtue. At work here is Descartes’ idea that the will is unlimited; the vulgar expression of this notion translates into tendencies to act as if it is possible to change oneself (one’s values and habits) merely through desire and without a more incarnate discipline incorporating body and mind.

Stemming from Descartes’ idealism, Hume’s fork fractures knowledge into relations of ideas and empirical facts, both of which reject the ability of the mind to conform to reality as it is, beyond mental constructs—a method brought to fruition in Kant and advanced by the ardent desire for certainty obtained through the scientific method. The roots of many impoverished views, such as relativism, nihilism, rationalism, and materialism, retain the similar presumptions of these thinkers logically unfolded over time. Many other strains of thought coincide to produce and nurture the isolation of the individual mind over and against the world outside the knower. The inner-subjectivity reigns supreme in one sense, while the need for consistent laws and rules arise to counterbalance this movement toward individuality. Consequently, many ventures in thought do not even begin to consider topics that cannot be verified or proven in a systematic way—as has been shown by the dynamics involved in a two-person dialogue. Yet this approach leaves out a great deal of potential knowledge and does not adequately express the lived experience. Since all knowing must conform to the scientific method in order to be valid, no other types of knowledge matter, or, more accurately, even qualify as knowledge because of their ‘uselessness.’

Is the evidence for this determination as strong as it seems? Beginning on the level of empirical facts, which tend to cater to the predilections of contemporary mind, it
is clear that a human infant cannot survive without certain basic necessities. The child, of course, must receive physical and emotional nourishment that he cannot provide for himself. From this most basic observation, it can be shown that the human condition begins in dependence and receptivity—so much so that one cannot continue to exist apart from having lived through this state. Is it altogether clear, then, that this is just one phase of human life from which people emerge on the way toward greater self-sufficiency? In the ordinary sense, yes: people learn to feed and clothe themselves, and within optimum conditions for development they obtain a significant degree of independence in comparison with their earlier years.

Lying just beneath the surface, however, are a myriad of hidden similarities indelibly connecting the person to his initial helpless condition. In modern societies, people are often totally dependent on others, such as farmers and manufacturers, to provide them with food and drink. Most people do not have gardens, and even if they do, they cannot sustain themselves and their families on the output. The same rationale holds for shelter: few people actually build their homes, and even if they do, they still are reliant on others for all of the different products used and the various skills involved. Perhaps one could argue that people still have a sense of independence because they buy these necessities with the money they earn. Once again, though, upon closer examination, most people are not self-employed and so rely on others to provide them with the opportunity to earn their livelihood. And those who are self-employed still need others with whom to do business, so that the fruits of their labor are mediated and made meaningful only through the involvement of others. In a more general sense, the supposed self-sufficiency of people holds only to the extent that others before them have
made decisions to their benefit. This principle can be seen at the broadest level concerning the type and quality of government, the policies and practices of this government, especially in relation to environmental issues, and the kind of societal opportunities available to the governed. More specifically, an individual’s family situation, opportunity for education, encounter with role models, and learned/inherited attitudes will dictate that person’s drive and ambitions. A complex feedback loop weathered by many different forces mold the individual in a give-and-take that cannot be reduced to the naïveté latent in the idea of the self-made man.

Perhaps this explanation is unfairly biased because it only considers people already dependent on their cultures and communities. Is it possible then, considering man removed from the modern complications of complex societies, to imagine a truly self-sufficient human being—a kind of Rousseau-inspired primitive solitary man as developed in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*? Once again, the individual encounters the same difficulties in meeting his needs for survival. This approach is merely a subterfuge for acknowledging man’s essentially communal nature. Even on his own, he cannot sustain his species generally, and he certainly cannot develop his own humanity, i.e. capacity for speech and higher order thinking. Reproduction necessitates some form of family; human beings are set apart from other animals by their capacity for rationality. Man will always need some form of community, even if the family is the only such source he finds, in order to retain that which makes him unique as an animal, and in order to further humankind as a whole. The idea that man can somehow be solitary and self-reliant is not merely an abstraction, used for practical purposes in social contract theories; rather, it is an illusion.
This is a *prima facie* case for the conclusion that even in his healthiest condition, whether in modern-complex societies, hypothetical primordial states, or anything in between, man is essentially reliant on forces outside of his control for his existence. From this realization, the question can properly be asked: What does it *really* mean to assert that human beings cannot exist on their own? How profoundly is one willing to plumb this question? Borrowing from the idea inherent in the literary technique whereby the narrative starts in the middle of the story or drama instead of from its beginning, known as *in media res* (literally, ‘in the middle of things’), an analogy can be drawn that most adequately captures the experience of human beings in the world. People are not ‘self-made,’ nor are they self-sufficient once in existence. All of their choices are tempered and situated within a greater context, by forces both within and outside of their control. Pieces of the continuous whole surround a person, placing one in the middle of a rich tapestry of reality flanking one’s own beginning and end. While the view from the middle may not be completely intelligible, it most certainly proves the overwhelming all-encompassing existence of the multi-faceted and awe-inspiring cosmic landscape unfolding all around one’s temporal position.

**Knowing, Existence, and Experience**

Beginning with the second observation taken from the example of the conversation—that there must be an actual correspondence between the mind and the thing known—it can be shown that the performance of the intellect necessarily demonstrates man’s natural receptivity. The process of coming to know anything, whether something as simple as the weather or as complex as another human being,
requires the knower to be adequate, *adaequatio*, to the thing grasped. As Aquinas succinctly and yet profoundly explained, “Truth is the conformity of the mind with being, according as it says that what is, is, and that what is not, is not.”³ This might seem simple, yet it is not synonymous with a common sense notion of truth. Aquinas is not describing a kind of Lockean correspondence theory, whereby the truth must be a mere copy of the real: “To conceive it as a pure and simple copy of the external real, devoid of any discrimination, is a deceptive simplification to to the unconscious materialism of the imagination.”⁴ The truth is not always pictoral; in fact, it is primarily immaterial and non-picturalizable. Language expresses thoughts in spatial terms only analogously. However, thought transcends these limitations because abstraction does not take place within space and time. The mind can conform to being in different ways, thus enabling that person in the example to converse with the other being in the room because it has the form of a human person and so is capable of speech, rational thought etc. The singular representation of a man does not convey these potentialities, and so this recognition does not take place on the material level. One can still recognize what a human being *is* regardless of particular physical peculiarities and variations. The human mind abstracts from the particular principles that are universal and unchanging—the likes of which cannot be found in the material world.⁵ In mathematics, for example, the human mind can take universals and comprehend them even though there is no immediate material representation of the thing present for the mind to copy. People are therefore adequate for knowledge in a different way than a common-sensical strict one-to-one materialistic correspondence.
What kind of knowledge is the human mind adequate for? The knower starts by being immersed in reality. He is thrust into the world around him, and the mind receives the things of reality so that, as these things resonate within the mind, the person can begin to become aware of himself as a knower. Concepts are formed partially by the subject, the knower, and partially from the thing to be known, the object. Conception, as a real creation, occurs in the mind from the merging of the object and the subject. The concept is the fruit of these two aspects joined together. Knowing is, therefore, a becoming. When the mind apprehends some thing in extramental reality, it determines what things are through this unifying process.

The things of the world, which have existed and continue to exist apart from the mind’s perception, give man the tools to know himself. On the most basic level, the act of knowing (judgment \textit{in actu exercito}) presents “an implicit experience of the truth of the mind as well as the germ (still hidden and preconscious) or intuition of the experience of ourselves.”\textsuperscript{6} Simply put, it would be a performatory contradiction to deny the real intelligible existence of things and the mind’s innate order toward knowing them. Making judgments about the world necessarily involves the affirmation of the knower’s faculties and their reliability. This act of judging extramental reality also provides the intellect with the misty first echoes of a greater vision of itself. Therefore, ideas themselves are not what the mind perceives but rather they are the medium through which the mind perceives (\textit{medium quo}, not \textit{medium quod}). The mind must conform to the truth outside of it, and there is a “living connection”\textsuperscript{7} between the subject and object. As Maritain stated, “Realism is lived by the intellect before being recognized by it.”\textsuperscript{8}
Without being enveloped by the richness of reality, man can neither exercise his rationality nor come to know himself.

Descartes, Hume, Berkeley, and Kant paved the way for modern and postmodern philosophers who believe knowing begins in the mind, and so they begin philosophy with epistemology alone. However, as has been shown, the mind can only know and begin to know itself when it acknowledges the real existence and apprehension of things outside the mind. The mind is always in communion with reality; artificial separations, such as the ‘cogito,’ overtime lead to a schism between the human person and the world around him, referred to as the critical problem or the ‘problem of the bridge.’ No philosophy that denies the basic facts of metaphysics—such as the realist’s explanation of truth, which best captures the everyday experience of the human person—can sustain itself and overcome this problem. The human knower suffocates when he is cut off from the things of reality that fill him up and help him to recognize what he truly is, i.e. the roots of understanding his own essence are grounded in the things of reality.

There has been a movement among Thomists whereby they bring into focus the importance of existence in Aquinas’ thought, i.e. esse. This has largely been ignored by modern thinkers, who instead start immediately with essences, the whatness of things. They skip over the fact that things are. This is where the divide in modern thought, and the legacy absorbed by postmodern thought, becomes most evident and most damaging. It can be seen in the simple epistemological act of judgment, where two concepts are connected, e.g. the snow is white. According to the realist, while being an obvious statement of fact, this is also an observation of an existential nature, where the copula ‘is’ also connotes the recognition of being. It is simultaneously a statement of existence: the
snow is white. This is not a mere connection of ideas that takes place solely in the mind, a kind of commentary on the way one thinks; rather, it is a much more profound profession that snow shares in the same existence that the knower experiences.

The kinds of presumptions that take reality as a given do not only affect academic thinking. As has been previously suggested, the fragmentation of thought finds its reflection in the way people ordinarily think and approach the world: at one level, these kinds of basic truths resonate with people since they most satisfactorily capture the lived experience, while at the same time people accept the contrived distinctions made by modern thought and so absorb the impoverished metaphysic lying behind such thinking. Existence is taken for granted and seen as an obvious starting point to be skipped over in modern thought. It does not fit into the scientific method for it is not something that can be measured, quantified, or studied in such an objective way. So since science does not directly deal with existence, and modern thought tried to confine all thinking to the method employed by the hard sciences, wondering about existence was no longer seen as something worthy of pursuit.

In fact, the scientific-method even denies the validity of questions about existence. This is most clearly demonstrated by Bertrand Russell’s response to Frederick Copleston’s questions, during their debate on the existence of God, about what could be the cause of the universe as a whole: “I should say that the universe is just there, and that's all.” This method of thought only permits the examination of connections between being, but it is a closed-system in the sense that questions about being—questions of a why-something-rather-than-nothing nature, cannot even arise or be intelligibly discussed. The question seeking a cause for existence is truly unintelligible via the scientific
method. This approach is fine for the scientist, but it is not a proper method for the philosopher. As Victor Frankl aptly notes, “The present danger does not really lie in the loss of universality on the part of the scientist [scientific method], but rather in his pretence and claim of totality…What we have to deplore therefore is not so much the fact that scientists are specialising, but rather the fact that specialists are generalising.”

The determinant of what constitutes ‘real’ knowledge in most of Western culture is undeniably science, yet this results in a lived contradiction given the range of ways people actually know and experience reality.

Nonetheless, the Thomistic insight does resound in human nature despite the recent stifling of inquiries into the nature of existence. Augustine, with an unsullied and almost childlike sense of awe, notes: “We look upon the heavens and the earth, and they cry aloud that they were made.” Beginning with the question of existence allows one to acknowledge a more intimate indentification with the things of reality, and it opens one up to the marvel of existence as well as the glaring questions left unanswered by the very fact of existence. It also helps to prevent the jaded isolation and stark, disenchanted individuality that one must accept if people are first ‘thinking things’ that only truly know the content of their own thoughts or sensory impressions. There does seem to be an intrinsic connection between existence and intelligibility, and the human mind seems adequate for comprehending this intelligibility in physical reality.

Perhaps the best example to express the difference in approach being put forth is by reference to an example in a lecture given by Peter Kreeft. Imagine that someone is walking home alone during the night. He believes that he is by himself when suddenly he hears a noise. He looks but thinks it is only the wind rustling the leaves. So he keeps
walking. Then he hears another noise and turns quickly to see that it is just a stray cat climbing a tree. He again continues walking by himself. Then he hears something that clearly sounds like footsteps. That sudden jolt, the recognition that there is someone else out there, that he is not alone and there is another intelligent knower perceiving him, is awe-inspiring, comforting, and frightening all at the same time.

The acknowledgment of this shared existence is anything but bland and mundane. This is akin to the first presumption in the example of the conversation, which stated that each speaker must believe that the other person actually exists. It should be clearer that this recognition is not to be overlooked or underestimated, for, as Maritain pointed out, it puts one in contact with the “implicit experience of the truth of the mind” as well as the “preconscious” knowledge that is the “intuition of the experience of ourselves.” In other words, the mind knows the world first as it really is, and the innermost identification of the human mind with the things of extramental reality—especially in the experience of another intellect—reveals an intrinsic existential similitude that lays the foundation for self-knowledge.

This leads to the revisiting of the third conclusion drawn from the prerequisites for the conversation: the persons must share some common experience between them. Before going on to examine this, it is helpful to ask, what is an experience? It might seem reasonable to proceed in the following way: experience has a subjective and an objective component because it involves a person witnessing and interpreting some event. Given this approach, the person would then have a unique interpretation of this event, which would constitute the whole of the experience for that person. It seems, then, that the event itself and the person’s interpretation of this event can be separated.
Accordingly, does this position assert that there must be some ‘raw’ un-interpreted experience—that there is the experience and then the person’s interpretation of this experience?

W. T. Stace, referring specifically to mysticism but also to experiences more generally, argues that one can analyze and break down mystical experiences into the experience itself and the mystic’s interpretation of the experience. He provides a concrete example of these distinctions by referring to an anecdote: When an American visitor in London walked into Madame Tussaud’s (presumably before there was one in New York), he shook hands with a waxwork policeman before he realized it was only a wax figure. He uses this to show that an experience is distinguishable from an interpretation, for otherwise there could not have been two interpretations of the same experience—seeing the waxwork policeman. This seems innocent enough to conclude. He uses this distinction to analyze the contents of numerous mystics’ experiences throughout the rest of his work so as to discursively separate their interpretations from the ‘raw’ reality they witnessed. Paradoxically, he then goes on to claim that “at no time was the experience [of the mystics] free of interpretation and even that such a pure experience is psychologically impossible.”

An insight gleaned from postmodern thought is helpful here: however else this may apply to mystical experiences, the basic fact remains that Stace’s distinction, according to his critic Steven Katz, is “naively conceived” and fails to take into account the complex linguistic, social, historical, and conceptual contexts within which experiences take place. Building on the previous explanations about existence and human knowing, people need a common framework of meaning within which their
experiences can occur and subsequently become communicable. Katz strongly insists that, while experience shapes belief, belief also shapes experience, leading him to conclude that, “There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.” For the present considerations, this means that understanding and communication always occur within a certain milieu. Human beings are not pure intellects; both mind and body are involved in experiencing, and this creates the necessity for contexts, filters, and media. Human “existence is historical,” and the greatest context is culture. People require a robust culture to make sense of the world and to bring their natures to fulfillment. It is impossible to even have an experience without mediators. Culture is always half-given to and half-created by people since their existence is historically situated. There is a communal nature to experience that results in a kind of mix of freedom between the individual and the society, although neither would be free in any sense without the other.

One caveat should be mentioned here: Katz swings too far in the other direction from Stace toward a pure pluralism where experiences can have no real objective validity because they are contextually situated in an exclusive sense. For him, contexts create impenetrable boundaries, but this is only because his argument too strongly emphasizes the subjective. He has inherited the modern tradition whereby one begins in the human mind (idealism). There is always an intrinsic commensurability between the mind and truth. However, due to human nature itself, truth is necessarily situated and revealed to the mind in different contexts, with no single intuition encapsulating the whole. People can only experience reality through their social-historical moment in time, but this does not mean that there can be nothing transcendent or relevant about these experiences:

Like an Oscar Romero or a Dorothy Day or a Mother Teresa, we will end living a life that could have been lived only in our own day, but like an apprentice artist, we need a well-stocked supply
The similarity among these people, in terms of their exemplary character, is recognizable regardless of the fact that they appeared in different places in history. Knowing is more an organic and dynamic venture whereby the drama unfolds involving man’s mixed freedom. The microcosm of this struggle is in experience itself: how much does one bring to an experience (belief shaping experience) and how much is actually given from without (experience shaping belief)? Man’s existence is indeed situated and dependent, and this stems directly from man’s nature as mind and body united: “Humans, however, because they are aware of themselves and thus of the world—because they are conscious beings—exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom.”

Take human existence, knowing, and experience as an analogy for man’s position in life. Man cannot develop his rationality alone (which constitutes the fullness of being and that which makes man fully man). Even when man starts to develop his intellect, he can only do so by being attuned to the things of reality while remaining reliant on the gifts of culture and the gifts of history to form the way he knows as well as what he knows. To be a human knower is to be receptive. Human understanding alone is not enough to even have an experience. This shows that man is essentially dependent and essentially receptive. It is now clear that there must be a greater context for human life if even one’s own particular life is to make sense. Human existence is not self-explanatory; it cannot be taken as an objective fact, a scientific starting point, apart from the greater existential questions exposed when one actually pauses and receives an intuition into the
magnitude of being. Everything that human beings are, and everything that they do, requires a context larger than themselves for realization.

Now the question originally posed can begin to be more adequately answered: What does it really mean to assert that human beings cannot exist on their own? People find themselves in the middle of an analogy. They have a great deal of freedom, but it seems to somehow be limited by their circumstances. They want to believe it is possible to be pure intellect and pure will, yet they must contend with physical realities too. They seek the universal and the true in knowing, yet they are constantly contained by particular cultural-historical contexts. They seem to be the most intelligent beings and conscious knowers in the physical universe, but they can claim no responsibility for creating the things they study. People experience life as if thrust into the middle of things, for there seems to be a current that runs both before and after their lifetimes, into which they step unaware of the bigger picture but are nonetheless swept up and carried along for the ride. Where are they going and from whence did they come? The best and most adequate response demands a richer metaphysic than currently available in modern and postmodern thought: reality is made up of a hierarchy of Being, with humanity situated on the horizon between pure spirit and pure matter.

The Hierarchy of Being

Proceeding from the most basic observations, there seem to be general differences among the things of the world that can be classified as ‘levels of Being.’ The lowest level is that of inanimate matter, or minerals, which seems to be the most ubiquitous type of existence. The next level of being—plants—has additional characteristics that make it
‘living’ and capable of reproduction. Animals are greater than both these levels because they are material and living, but they also possess a fuller awareness and responsiveness to the world around them. They have the power of consciousness, which is easily observed when one interacts with them. This view simply states the common-sense notion that it is better to be a dog than a tree, and it is better to be a tree than a rock. It cannot be forgotten, of course, that there must be another level of Being since animals do not engage in the kind of abstraction necessary to make even this argument. Human beings are self-aware, i.e. they have intellects that allow them to know the world and reflect upon their knowledge. The differences found between each of the levels are not merely differences in degree: the hierarchy of Being represents differences in kind and quality among the levels as well.

E.F. Schumacher presents this ancient way of seeing the world, characteristic in the views of thinkers such as Aristotle, in a modern light. He develops the hierarchy of Being in the following way:

- **Human**: $m + x + y + z$ (self-awareness)
- **Animal**: $m + x + y$ (consciousness)
- **Plant**: $m + x$ (life)
- **Mineral**: $m$

$M$ (mineral) is the only facet of being that is visible. $X$ (life), $y$ (consciousness), and $z$ (self-awareness) are invisible, and although it is difficult to state exactly what constitutes these somewhat mysterious and ambiguous potentialities, common experience points to their existence most plainly by way of recognition of their absence. For example, one can easily recognize a plant that has been destroyed, such as a dead tree, and know that the plant is lacking something it once had, i.e. $x$. Similarly, one can make a distinction between a dead animal (lacking $x$) and an unconscious one (lacking $y$), knowing that both
of these states differ from an animal possessing all of its properties in respect to its level of Being. Finally, although the most nuanced distinction, it is also possible to recognize a human being deprived of z. Self-awareness and higher order thinking can be less developed in some people, or can be totally lacking as the result of, for example, brain trauma; nonetheless, people in these conditions still are living and conscious. Similarly, one can see a person in a coma and realize that, although this person lacks both consciousness and self-awareness, he is still living; it is also clear when a person lacks x, y, and z. While these variables cannot be defined comprehensively, everyone has a working knowledge of them. They are mysterious insofar as humans cannot create them. It is easy enough to destroy them, but people can only bring about the conditions necessary for their fruition (e.g. planting a seed) while utilizing m (minerals), which also to a large extent evade complete human mastery.

The differences between the levels of Being are qualitative differences, differences in kind. There is an “ontological discontinuity” between each jump in the level. These are not variations that can come about gradually, or can be explained in purely quantitative terms. Either something is alive or it is not. No accumulations or special arrangements of m account for x, y, or z. Scientists have very recently invoked this explanation of the world, adopting the hierarchy of Being to better account for their calculations and discoveries. MIT-trained Israeli scientist Gerald Schroeder, along with John Haldane of the University of St. Andrew’s in Scotland, characterize these four levels as inanimate matter, life, sentient consciousness, and mind. They have found that the dramatic changes that have occurred from one level of Being to the next have no clear material causes. For example, the remarkable conversion from inanimate matter
(m) to life (y) are inexplicable and are differences in kind, for “something that could do nothing is now able to extract nourishment from its environment, grow, and reproduce itself, ‘true to form.’”23 The next jump in existence, the introduction of sentient consciousness (y), is equally “incomparable” and “incommensurable”24 with the prior levels. For the first time there is something akin to an interior ‘space’ wherein the animal can feel and think separate from the world outside it. Again, there is no way to account for this drastic and abrupt change by referring merely to inanimate matter (m). The last ‘ontological discontinuity’ can be observed in the sudden appearance of intellect, or a mind capable of knowing the world and not merely responding to it. No other known creature composed of m possesses this kind of intelligence. This self-reflective intellect, coming from an unintelligent universe, is utterly inexplicable given the fact that man can know the universe but the universe cannot know man. Z is highly mysterious and intangible, for, it appears that “there is something able to say ‘I’ and to direct consciousness in accordance with its own purposes.”25 Self-awareness introduces a new mode of being—personhood—distinct from the prior levels by the addition of two primary features: intellect and will. Z is the most superior observable ‘power:’ “The notion of person signifies what is most perfect in all nature.”26 The profound differences that characterize these four levels show that there are fundamental discontinuities between the levels.

The understanding of the world marked by the hierarchy of Being necessitates seeing things in terms of ‘higher’ and ‘lower.’ It contradicts the notion that one can sensibly view reality ‘horizontally’ in terms of relations of ideas and natural laws. Haldane makes an important distinction between the two possible kinds of explanation.
The first is most properly called a description, for it is a matter of observing patterns, rules, and laws. The realm of science, which primarily deals with the study of \( m \), is most adequately equipped to answer these kinds of queries. These types of explanations provide a description of the occurrence of phenomena. Another level of explanation, though, requires an intuition beyond self-referential descriptions to answer questions such as the purpose or reason behind a given phenomena. For example, if a little girl asks her mother why sugar dissolves in a glass of water, she could respond in a purely descriptive way by stating the regularities present in the observed properties of matter, i.e., ‘this is what always happens when one mixes the sugar particles in the water.’ While this answer can vary in terms of its particularity and scientific complexity, it never fully ceases to be self-referential because it is essentially descriptive; the sugar dissolves in water because it does. However, an answer in terms of the purpose or reason underlying this phenomenon, a more existential-type of query, demands reference to some kind of agent or efficient cause. Why this happens, why these regularities are present, cannot be answered purely by reference to the sensible observations. This latter meaning of explanation requires the vision of qualitatively different, higher and lower, levels of Being. Science might be able to provide descriptive explanations of plants, animals and humans strictly in terms of \( m \), but these accounts are sealed off from the heart of the distinctions that really define and differentiate the levels.

It is difficult to truly appreciate the radical break from modern thinking that this position, the hierarchy of Being, represents. Given the trend of moving away from an enchanted, ‘magical’ view of the world that seeks spiritual explanations to Newton’s view of ‘dead matter,’ it is almost second-nature to try to devise material explanations for
these ‘powers,’ x, y, and z—thus diminishing them to differences of degree. Yet this amounts to believing that if one could take quantities of rocks, and only have the right number of them and only organize them in the right way, it would be possible for them to think.28 This kind of paradigm obviously contradicts common sense. Specific combinations of matter cannot, rationally speaking, bring about truly immaterial consequences. Instead, experience of these invisible ‘powers’ shows that they are increasingly rare and increasingly interior as they progress up the levels. In comparison with the magnitude of the known physical universe, life itself is startlingly sparse. Above this, animals with sentient consciousness are even less numerous than the multifarious forms of plant-life. Human beings, the highest of the four levels, exhibit truly the most unique and least common ‘power’ because of their capacity for self-awareness, or rationality.

The fact that x, y, and z are increasingly interior requires an understanding of the inherent unity of things that work for a common purpose. Extrinsic unity, by contrast, can be seen in the example of an airplane: “if you remove the parts of an airplane, its steel, plastic, wood, cushions etc., they continue to exhibit the same properties outside as inside and can be put together again in the proper order to reconstitute the plane…The same with computers, all machines.”29 Its parts do not have an intrinsic unity wherein they join for a new purpose that is otherwise unattainable when they are incomplete. The mineral level is the least unified because it can be divided and separated without essentially changing: e.g., one can chop up a piece of wood without it being altered significantly. This level is also the most externally visible although, paradoxically, it does not contain real (unified) entities.
Plants, animals, and humans, however, have greater integration and so are capable of having interiority, or motivations and impulses that move them from within. This is least true for plants, for while they do respond to stimuli as entities separate from the rest of the world, such as through phototropism, it is possible to cut-up plants so that their parts continue living. Consequently, it is difficult to imagine that they have a very rich interior life, if it is possible for them to have one at all given their somewhat ‘one-dimensional’ existence. Animals and humans, conversely, are much more integrated and would die if their parts were disunited. Their life-sustaining forms require that all their parts work together for a common goal, namely, the good of the entity. The heart, for example, would die if extricated from the body and decompose into “lower chemicals with quite different properties.” However, animals are less mentally integrated than humans, for they lack comprehensive and sophisticated memories and intellects. While the interior ‘space’ of animals is significantly greater than that of plants, for they are capable of making decisions, experiencing emotions, communicating etc., even their more profound interiority does not compare with that of humans. People have the most unlimited potential and can grasp more of the ‘big picture’ than any thing below them. The human experience of the world is by far the most splendid and meaningful because of this added intelligibility, i.e. self-awareness.

Schumacher describes self-awareness as “limitless potentiality.” For human beings, knowing is quantitatively unbounded. Man is uniquely capable of bringing the whole universe into his experience. Unlike the confined existence and set actuality of the lower levels, humans experience no restrictions in knowing; it is “open-ended,” an infinite capacity, because people have the ability to learn about anything and everything
in the world because of their reason. Through abstraction, people can attain, intentionally, ever increasing plentitudes of both real beings and beings of reason. Since the human knower is not solely reliant on matter in a one-to-one correspondence, this also makes him the freest subject of the four levels. Plants and animals can only respond to immediate sensory perceptions. In this regard, they are chained down to the world of matter and are more properly seen as objects than subjects since their environments passively move them. Even animals are primarily responding to the world around them, and because they lack freedom, they cannot be creative beings. They are ruled by necessity, which is the “absence of any creative principle.” A prime example of this is the fact that animals are ahistorical creatures; they cannot create culture. Humans have some degree of control over their surroundings, and they can utilize their environment for their benefit; they are not totally subjugated to their existential position. Given the great freedom and creative powers that come with self-awareness, humans are subjects first. Common experience shared throughout human societies recognizes this distinctive level of Being as more dignified than the three lower ones: “To treat a person as if he or she were a mere object is a perversity, not to say a crime.”

All four elements \((m, x, y, z)\) are necessary in order to live most fully, to plumb and quench the natural depths of human existence. The ascension up the levels of Being also corresponds to an increase in the reality of things. Just as the ‘unity’ of a rock is fictitious, for it is not a real entity because it can be chipped away without losing an intrinsic form, so too does this level of Being satisfy the human need for reality—for truth, goodness, and beauty—least. Similarly, plants and animals have less intrinsic unity than humans, and they desire and embody lesser realities than those in the fourth level.
People are the only creatures that seek some kind of universal absolutes. They are also the only level that has a sense of morality, the notion that one ‘ought’ to do something. Humans alone have the unique capacity to perceive beauty, and the compulsion to create art, which usually lacks any utilitarian value. The only suitable world wherein a person can develop his unique capacities, apart from the animal nature that he shares with the lower level, requires concomitant human relationships. People are truly ‘political animals.’ Humans extricated from community would demonstrate more resemblance to the third level of Being; since the levels truly delineate qualitative differences, however, in the most profound sense, “a world without fellow human beings would be an eerie and unreal place of banishment.”

If human experience and knowing can be trusted—and it would be impossible to travel any further in this, or any argument, if this were not the case—it begs the question, how should it be that immaterial things exist in a purely material universe? Oddly enough, the things that give humans the most fulfillment are also the rarest in this world. Animals and plants find the majority of their satisfaction in inanimate matter. Human desires for creativity, beauty, truth, and goodness seem to radically contradict the ways of the vast majority of things in the known universe. They can only be grasped by a similarly immaterial ‘power’ of self-awareness, and human knowing is an essentially immaterial and infinite capacity in a seemingly finite world. The lived experience speaks of the inadequacy of this world to fully account for and satiate this fourth level of Being:

We struggle between a world that seems totally material and the emotional, even spiritual, pull we all feel at times. To relegate, a priori, those feelings of love and joy and spirituality to some assumed function of our ancestors’ evolutionary drive for survival masks the greatest pleasures in life, the experiential realization of the metaphysical.
As has been shown, the differences among the levels of Being seem to be oriented upward. If the most important things about a human being, that which makes a person human, are unseen, i.e. immaterial, then by extension it stands to reason that there could be other things in existence that are totally unseen.

Angelic and Divine Levels of Being

Interwoven throughout the hierarchy of Being is the analogy, the wellspring of human knowledge that bridges and enables “spiritual phototropism.” Without analogy, human knowing is mired by either anthropomorphism (univocity) or agnosticism (equivocation). The kind of analogy at work here is properly called the ‘analogy of proportionality’, which is “the only one [type of analogy] in which the same attributes can be asserted with literal truth of all its analogates [subjects].” This is not synonymous with the metaphor, which expresses that things are like one another. This kind of analogy, instead, highlights an inherent and literal similarity. As Cajetan has argued, “By means of analogy of proportionality we know indeed the intrinsic entity, goodness, truth, etc. of things.” He stresses that, when going from higher to lower levels of Being, analogy is absolutely essential to generate and preserve this kind of understanding. For example, strength can be applied to strength of muscles, strength of an argument, or strength of will. ‘Strength’ is not used in an entirely different sense for each subject, although it is not used in exactly the same way either. Analogies will, unfortunately, always be somewhat vague, imprecise, and ambiguous, for they do not grant the certitude of the univocal. Nonetheless, Aquinas puts epistemological goals in
perspective: “The slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge obtained of lesser things.”

Returning to the hierarchy of Being, the advances in kind observed at the four levels reach to higher realities and greater perfections. Being (existence) is the most proper analogy; the four levels of Being exist in different ways. The existence of a cat is truly different from human existence, although the concept is not entirely equivocal. The two species share matter, life, and consciousness, and so the term ‘existence’ can intelligibly be applied between the levels. Humans, it has been stated, are the most real, free, creative, interior, rare, unified, active subjects of the four levels. It also has been established that there are limitations to human freedom and independence. People are influenced by their environments in addition to their abilities to shape them; to some extent, people are objects given that they cannot be totally free and active in a world with material contingencies. Sometimes humans are acted upon and moved by the world around them, just like plants and animals. The integrity of human beings is also imperfect because people are never fully present to themselves; they are always spread out in time and space, so that only one slice of their existence is accessible at any given time. Their creativity, as well, is limited insofar as humans create from a borrowed palette. The aforementioned ‘spiritual phototropism’ reaches upward for the cause of human powers, a source that must be more perfect if it is able to confer qualities that could not rationally have come from the lesser.

Human potentialities and poverties spark the search for a wholly independent, wholly subject, totally free, completely active, purely creative, uncaused cause. A human being has will and intellect (personality), as a part of self-awareness, but he also has
matter. As an historical being, he cannot have unmediated experiences, he requires culture, and he can only know himself through the things of the world. His material aspects are bound by space and time, although he longs for and implicitly seeks transcendence, e.g., cultures and traditions frequently have some notion of immaterial beings, such as ghosts, demons, spirits, ancestors etc. These kinds of beings, which can be termed ‘angels’, make up the fifth level of Being. They are pure intellects and pure wills, i.e., disembodied rationality. They are the ‘next step’ after human knowing, which shares some aspects with angelic knowledge given that it has been described as an infinite power. However, the angels not only have a limitless quantitative capacity to learn about the things of the world, but they also are not constrained by the need for the material world to trigger the epistemological process. They can have pure, unmediated experiences. They also are totally present to themselves since their understanding is not reliant on time and space. Having no need for material-sensory stimulation or conceptual tools, angelic knowing “penetrates at the first glance to the inside, to the heart of being.”\textsuperscript{43} There is immediacy to their knowledge, which more closely resembles intuition.

Angelic knowledge, as immediate, intuitive, and non-contextualized, demonstrates a higher level of knowing beyond the human. As Aquinas summarized, “intellectual life is more perfect in the angels whose intellect does not proceed from something extrinsic to acquire self-knowledge, but knows itself by itself.”\textsuperscript{44} The ‘powers’ observed at this level of Being begin to reveal the true orientation of the first four levels: “Belief in angels did not simply reinforce the view that, seen from above, the world is in its highest aspects spiritual; it presented the visible and material as
connected to and in some sense supporting and opening to things higher than itself." Even though they are purely spiritual beings, they still are, somehow, mutually involved with this world. They are not completely isolated from human existence, and their involvement has been described in many different ways by various cultures since the emergence of human life.

From the human perspective, angels are able to have a meaningful existence because they are also persons, i.e. they have wills and intellects. Human personality underlies the unique human capacity for conversation; personality encapsulates the entire discussion on human knowing, experience, and existence. In Maritain’s words, “A person is a center of liberty; a person confronts things, the universe; talks with another person, communicates with him by understanding and affection.” Analogously, the pure spirituality of angelic personhood results in higher unity, integrity, liberty, and self-awareness. Since their experience transcends human experience, humans can know them principally through analogy. It is impossible to know a higher level of Being exactly and univocally, just as a plant cannot understand the consciousness of a dog. Nonetheless, human knowledge is not completely closed-off from understanding the higher. Human self-awareness and rationality recognize that there need to be causes for material phenomena, and the very search for these causes cannot be totally equivocal lest man’s own ‘powers’ be rendered incomprehensible. For example, advances in scientific knowledge could not proceed if humans were not adequate to recognize the intelligibility of laws of nature and material organization as they have been discovered—not created—by science. The rules and regularities that seem to govern matter are not material, and yet their intrinsic intelligibility can be attained by the human mind. Similarly, humans can
know angels (the higher) insofar as they participate\textsuperscript{48} in personhood (the intrinsic intelligibility attained).

Angels still, however, are not the source of personhood. Even the pure rationality of the angels does not contain the self-sufficient reason for their own existence. Aquinas explains the limitation of angels as follows: “Yet their life does not reach the highest degree of perfection...because in them to understand and to be are not the same thing...Therefore, the highest perfection of life belongs to God, whose understanding is not distinct from His being.”\textsuperscript{49} So there is a sixth level of Being, and this is the uncaused cause, the completion of the analogy, Being itself. In relation to this sixth level, angels are finite; they still receive and learn about extrinsic essences that they did not create. They are also incomparably less integrated and unified, as their will and intellect are inseparable yet distinct (e.g., demons are simply angels who \textit{will} to rebel against Goodness, despite their superior \textit{intellectual} powers). The highest level of Being is the source of all the potentialities and actualities of the five lower levels, for it is the height of all the upward reaching qualities—totally free, actualized, invisible/immaterial, completely unified and eternal, pure intelligibility and creativity—while also remaining outside of the time-space continuum. Since it is the source, the analogies present in the hierarchy of Being are more comprehensible; it is properly reasonable to assert that, “a mouse knows; a human being knows; an angel knows; God knows.”\textsuperscript{50}

Aquinas obviously personalizes God by referring to this highest level as ‘His Being;’ is this conclusion justified? Is there a necessary danger of anthropomorphizing personality in applying it to God? In keeping with the distinction between analogy of proper proportionality and metaphor, it is possible to make statements about God without
them necessarily being a human projection. For example, referring to God’s ‘hands’ evidently has metaphorical significance alone, while remarks on God’s knowledge, goodness, or love can be attained analogically. The human encounter with these otherworldly aspects of reality points to immateriality. Although human beings cannot know God absolutely, there is no reason to limit to man’s analogical understanding of God: “The inviolable secret of the deity does not, then, prevent the Divine Essence being known by us, not in itself, but because it communicates a created participation of itself to what is not itself.”

The source of these communications must act out of generosity because, if it is truly a self-sufficient uncaused cause, it would be under no obligation to create anything. Since things exist, specifically persons who are aware of intelligibility, goodness, beauty, and unity in the universe, a mere Plotinian notion of this Being is unsatisfying and incomplete. Personality must analogically apply to God, for He is the source of personality, which is “the seal of transcendence.”

As Maritain explains, without personality, “the ocean of infinite perfections, however high above all thought they may be recognized to be, would not achieve a separate existence.”

God must have intellect and will, but He is also completely unified and integrated. If God lacked personality, then one Being would not be able to account for all reality (e.g. self-awareness) and so would be imperfect. It is anthropomorphic to consider God as impersonally spread out in time and space, as ‘Becoming,’ because rationality demands one, truly transcendent and perfect cause. Everything that is in existence first exists in God, and so God is the perfection of all the inexplicable mysteries, such as love, experienced at the fourth level of Being. Just as a parent is able to give love to his child without diminishing his own existence, God is able to lovingly
create without losing anything ontologically—existence is truly a gift. As a person, God can will and love and know in the most authentic sense as an “absolute subject,” exclusive of all passivity or receptivity.

Now humanity becomes clearer in light of this greater context. To be human is to be an active receiver. One must, therefore, become adequate for the true gift of reality. N. M. Tyrrell provides an example: a book can have many levels of significance dependent upon the adequateness of the perceiver. An animal would regard a book as merely a colored shape. A completely uneducated person would see it as a series of marks on pages. Tyrrell supposes that intelligent beings, unaccustomed to writing and printing yet familiar with discovering the external relationships of things, will try to figure out the laws or rules orchestrating the relationships of the letters. “They will think they have discovered the laws of the book when they have formulated certain rules governing the external relationships of the letters,” and so their method will not allow them to seek any further understanding. However, reading the book as an expression of meaning is the highest and fullest level of significance. This requires that a person know the language and is searching for the meaning behind the words. The three former ways of interpreting the book do not represent factual or logical mistakes: “When the level of the knower is not adequate to the level (or grade of significance) of the object of knowledge, the result is not factual error but something much more serious: an inadequate and impoverished view of reality.” The book does have shape and color, marks on pages, and letters that are governed by external relational rules. Yet none of these impressions are wholly sufficient. The sensory data is the same; such distinctions are in the mind of the perceiver, i.e. how adequate he is to the reality in front of him.
“The level of significance to which an observer or investigator tries to attune himself is chosen, not by his intelligence, but by his faith.” Faith is necessary to be adequate to the whole of reality, to agree to set the level of the search beyond the immediately visible. Just as musicians must train themselves to produce and appreciate complicated compositions that elude the otherwise untrained ear, simply because one cannot appreciate an intricate piece of music does not entitle one to assume that the thing inaccessible to him has no existence. Similarly, man must become adequate to see the truths of the invisible levels above humanity. Man can choose not to see the higher levels of Being; however, without the levels of Being, he cannot distinguish between things that are not equally real. Just as in Plato’s cave, man will no longer be able to see differences in unity, integrity, interiority, subjectivity, etc., and he will mistake the shadows of reality for its totality, consequently leading him to quit seeking causes or fuller explanations for things.

Faith, Reason, and Human Nature

John Paul II, pointing out the insufficiencies of modern thought, wrote of the intrinsic connection between “the eclipse of the sense of God and of man.” Overtime, the Enlightenment Project sought to sever the top two levels of Being so as to privatize faith and exalt the objectivity of reason. John Paul II also noted the impact this would have on humanity: “when God is forgotten the creature itself becomes unintelligible.” Seeing man as situated in the middle of the hierarchy of Being, in medias res, also sets humanity apart while giving man’s nature a transcendent context. In cutting off the angelic and divine levels of Being, modernity triggered the reduction of man that
continues to this day. Humanity is lost in two ways: firstly, the setting aside of faith and the glorification of reason made man out to be the measure of all things, yet that which makes him uniquely human—once extricated from its greater context in the levels of Being—cannot sustain its uniqueness. Secondly, as reason itself begins to fall when not supported by the hierarchy of Being, absolutes fall with it, leaving in its place only subjectivity and a vacuous concept of what constitutes man as man; the fall of faith (in the levels of reality) necessarily leads to the fall of reason. This second tragedy corresponds more to the postmodern era, although the contemporary mind is in a state of transition so that elements of both movements inexplicably weave in and out of present day thinking. Nonetheless, the same root issue precipitates each of the two problems. The current level of faith is set too low: “Faith is not in conflict with reason, nor is it a substitute for reason. Faith chooses the grade of significance or the Level of Being at which the search for knowledge and understanding is to aim.” People need to become adequate to the deeper realities present but not immediately visible.

In the first movement—the glorification of reason—it could be believed that faith, once cut out and privatized, left a totally public reason common to all in its place. A mechanistic and scientific materialist view of reality inflates the confidence of the human knower to possess and control nature. This exaltation of man and the capabilities of reason forgets that reason is informed by, shaped by, and intrinsically reliant upon faith. Faith chooses what will be seen. A strictly ‘objective’ (i.e. human knower separated from the world of things) view of the world neglects the fact that man is always in communion with the world around him, that man is inherently relational. While increasing the certainty and clarity of human knowledge, the quest for objectivity
simultaneously reduces man’s unique limitlessness in knowing. The “self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable” razes the hierarchy of Being and flattens reality by equating the real with matter. Reason becomes a difference of degree in this horizontal view of reality, and this position thus begins to nurture the seed of reason’s own demise. The problem is that reason does not ‘operate’ in a vacuum: “If I lack faith, and consequently choose an inadequate level of significance for my investigation, no degree of “objectivity” will save me from missing the point of the whole operation.” This position is not true to the lived experience; it rejects that people are part of a greater whole that can be known analogically. That which makes man special requires a comprehensible context, and if man cannot be qualitatively distinguished from the rest of the visible world then he lacks a foundation for the uniqueness of his nature. The hierarchy of Being represents the fullest way to behold human existence while not reducing some aspects of life from their proper sensibility and richness.

As the weaknesses in the first movement become apparent, the second movement toward the loss of humanity begins to see the false universality of reason. Attempts to recover man’s uniqueness (qualitatively different self-awareness) are vacuous without faith since faith has laid the foundation for reason. Nonetheless, two common responses to the crumbling of faith and reason are either agnosticism or a hyper-individualized and ambiguous ‘spirituality.’ In the former reaction, man no longer trusts reason’s ability to lead, analogically, to higher realities. The shell of reason left behind after the modern destruction of faith in qualitative differences in Being makes man extra cautious: “God’s transcendence and otherness are so exalted that our reason, our sense of the true and good, are no longer an authentic mirror of God.” After man’s experiences with the
arrogance of pure reason, such as the horrors of the dropping of the atomic bombs and the atrocities during World War II, agnosticism seems like a more attractive position. In the context of the hierarchy of Being, it amounts to asserting the following: “I am not willing to decide whether [reverting to Tyrrell’s example] a book is merely a colored shape, a series of marks on paper, a series of letters arranged according to certain rules, or an expression of meaning.” People believe they are cut-off from ‘higher’ knowledge and so necessarily become isolated. As Pope Benedict makes clear, “A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures.” Genuine community becomes impossible; to make up for this lacking, sometimes a void, individualistic, impersonal spirituality arises to take its place. Nonetheless it is always bounded by the total subjectivity and relativity that comes about when the asphyxiation of faith and reason leads to absolute cultural, historical, social, contexts; man truly creates his own meaning (idealism eventually causes suffocation). Reason and logic themselves simply become social constructions.

This second movement has questioned the validity of the uniformed and freestanding, neutral reason of modernity. While it has shown that reason alone is not sufficient to live well, it offers no grounds for the restoration of human nature. It has primarily furthered man’s descent from man. This postmodern movement needs to recognize that there can be no subjective without the objective. Man’s very existence is dependent upon absolute Existence. Also, mirrored in the knowing process as the complicated unity between the subjective knower and the object, there is a subjective component to faith (choosing the level of significance seen) as there is an objective
component to reason, but neither can be separated in such simplistic terms; and if both are rejected, then man cannot know—at all.

Man needs to rekindle his appreciation for higher and lower levels of Being, and through this he can come to respect his position in the analogy as well as his ability to know this via reason—reason and man’s true glory and grandeur. Frankl summarizes the lack of adequacy of Western thought, still applicable to current thinking: “The true nihilism of today is reductionism…Contemporary nihilism no longer brandishes the word nothingness; today nihilism is camouflaged as noth-ing-but-ness. Human phenomena are thus turned into epiphenomena.”67 The loss of a sense of awe and wonder in both movements result in the loss of a sense of who man is. Schumacher insists that “without the qualitative concepts of “higher” and “lower” it is impossible even to think of guidelines for living which lead beyond individual or collective utilitarianism and selfishness.”68 While this is true, guidelines for living are often formulated anyway beyond these baser considerations, although the values put forth often lack any foundation because they are not properly articulated or reflected upon (e.g., a concept of universal ‘human rights’ without any clear notion of an objective human nature is at its core inconsistent). Man knows through a kind of give and take that mysteriously unites the knower and the thing known. Man has experiences by way of a complicated process whereby he see things in a context that is partly given to him and partly his response to it. Man takes his existence and the existence of others as a fact. It is clear that in order to accept and rely on these assertions and processes man must see the mirror image of a reality and an intelligibility that is beyond his total comprehension and yet is accessible to him in layers. “Life, before all other definitions of it, is a drama of the visible and the
invisible,“ of an ongoing drama between man’s freedom (his active receptivity) and God’s freedom (as absolute Subject). There is no way to take life ‘at face value’ for nothing is plainly ‘self-evident.’

It is necessary for the contemporary mind to reevaluate the presuppositions that modern and postmodern thought have bequeathed in order to tap into the more intuitive truths by which people actually live, such as the conversation example in the beginning of this discussion showed. If people cannot make themselves adequate to experience the world in all its richness, an impoverished paradigm will sharply narrow human potentiality and leave people to live a life more suited to a lower level of Being. Fixating on the material and visible aspects of the world will bring about this very result: “If he can recognize nothing but “struggle for survival” and “will to power” fortified by cunning, his “world” will be one fitting Hobbes’s description of the life of man as ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.’” While man cannot fully comprehend that which is higher, he can behold it. He must realize that the whole world is an expression of meaning, that reality has a deeper infused significance it conveys and that this significance is accessible. Man gets the sense that the story of his life has not started from the beginning, that there is a deeper context he reaches for, and it is difficult to find his bearings when starting in medias res. Yet this ‘technique’ only adds to the rich mystery and complexity of a story ultimately greater than him. There is an unseen reality—humans are intrinsically connected and ordered to this truth, goodness, and beauty of reality. People must become receptive to the higher truths so as to behold them adequately and appreciate the analogy of Being.

1 The terms ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ as used in this paper, unless otherwise noted, refer primarily to general time periods and their respective movements of thought. ‘Modern’ thought begins roughly with the
philosophy of Rene Descartes (1596-1650), the legacy of which continues to this day. ‘Postmodern’
thought has its roots in modernity, although for the purposes of this paper it indicates the change in thinking
beginning about the middle of the twentieth century. Contemporary thought seems to be in a transition
from the former to the latter, somewhat blurring the distinction between time periods. Nonetheless, the
current movement of thought found in everyday discourse is more properly called ‘postmodern.’
2 A similar approach is taken by W. Norris Clarke, S.J. wherein he starts with the person as the best
reference for metaphysical inquiry. *The One and the Many* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press,
2001).
3 St. Thomas Aquinas qtd. in Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (1959; Notre Dame: University
4 Maritain 55.
5 Maritain’s primary thesis in *The Degrees of Knowledge* relies on the difference between the *thing* and the
*object*. The former is real being itself, corresponding roughly to Kant’s ‘noumena.’ Maritain does not
assert that this ultimate reality is unknowable, for it makes itself known to the mind through the object.
The object, furthermore, is not a pure fiction or tool of the mind. It is the medium through which things are
known, and this in no way seals off reality from the human knower. He asserts that there are three
fundamentally different ‘lights’ in which objects can be seen: *physica*, *mathematica*, and *metaphysica*.
These are the three degrees of knowing, or degrees of abstraction. The first seeks to know sensible being as
such, e.g. empirical science. The objects at this level are created symbols or myths to help explain the
world, such as Einstein’s theory of relativity. The second, *mathematica*, relies more on the intangible
beings of reason, such as numerical formulas and models. The method here seeks quantitative certainties
that are sometimes only nominally related to sensible being. The third degree, *metaphysica*, focuses on
being *qua* being; it is the most abstract for it seeks the pure intelligibility of things. These three ways of
knowing all, for instance, have their respective explanations of what a human being is. So long as the
distinctions between the approaches can be seen and maintained, it is fitting for each level to pursue its own
vision of reality. It becomes problematic when one confuses, instead of distinguishes, these different lights
under which reality can be seen, thus resulting in unnecessary tensions between disciplines such as
‘science’ and ‘philosophy.’
6 Maritain 95.
7 Maritain 80.
8 Maritain 83.
9 Bertrand Russell, 1948 British Broadcasting Corporation debate reproduced in *Bertrand Russell on God
Row, 1977) 5.
12 Peter Kreeft, www.PeterKreeft.com
Epistemology, and Mysticism,” Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York:
14 Stace qtd. in Katz 28.
15 Katz 29.
16 Katz 26.
19 Freire 99.
this metaphysical position informs the majority of the argument as put forth in this section of the paper.
Additionally, his discussion of the importance of ‘*adaequatio*’ (the knower being ‘adequate’) underlies
the major theme of this paper.
21 Schumacher 16.
22 John Haldane, Gerald Schroeder, Antony Flew, “Has Science Discovered God?” recorded symposium
spons. by The Institute for Metascientific Research at New York University, 2004.
23 Schumacher 16.
Research in this field suggests that the earliest forms of human communities included some form of shamanism as a part of their religious/spiritual worldview. Clear evidence for this is unavailable, however: “The claims that shamanism was the earliest form of religion and that it arose among early Homo sapiens may well be true. Shamanism is strongly associated with modern gatherer-hunter societies; and early, physically modern humans doubtless were gatherers and hunters.” (Stewart Guthrie, “McClenon’s ‘Shamanic Healing, Human Evolution, and the Origin of Religion’: A Critique,” Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Sept. 1997) 355.) The Shamanic worldview holds that shamans are “chosen by spirits, taught by them to enter trance and to fly with one’s soul to other worlds in the sky…When shamans talk of other worlds, they do not mean that these are disconnected from this world. Rather, these worlds represent the true nature of things and the true causes of events in this world.” (Piers Vitebsky, Shamanism (1995; Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001) 8.) It seems reasonable to assert that a belief in spirits has always been a part of human life. Unlike the ‘God of philosophy,’ however, angels/pure spirits are beyond the reach of the strictly metaphysical because, while reason alone can verify the necessity of an ‘uncaused cause,’ metaphysics does not demonstrate the necessity of angelic existence—it only suggests their existence. God is the only necessary Being; the other five levels of Being are contingent beings. As contingent beings, God is under no obligation to create angels—hence their lack of necessity. Man can know with certainty that the four lowest levels of Being exist empirically. However, angels represent the only contingent being that man cannot know either strictly empirically or through reason. This makes this level of Being perhaps the most elusive, although the pervasive ‘soft’ empirical evidence for their existence, along with the reasonability of their existence, will suffice for the discussion at hand.

According to Maritain: “that word ‘participation’ expresses in the ontological order the same thing expressed by the word ‘analogy’ in the noetic order.” 245.

56 Ibid., 42.
57 Schumacher 42.
58 Schumacher 43.
60 Pope John Paul II, ibid, no. 22 qtd. in Olsen 15.
61 Schumacher 45.
62 Pope Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections,” Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg, meeting with the representatives of science, 12 Sept. 2006.
63 Schumacher 43-4.
64 Benedict.
65 Schumacher 45.
66 Benedict.
67 Frankl qtd. in Schumacher, 5-6.
68 Schumacher 14.
70 Schumacher 35.
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Benedict XVI. “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections.” Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg, 12 Sept. 2006.


