

INFINITY, PERSON & IMMORTALITY

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~Pascal's Infini Rien

Pascal began the “wager” fragment of the *Pensées* with the words “Infini rien”¹. He supposed that men and women are infinite in the sense that there is no limit to human knowledge. Their minds extend to the furthest extent of the universe. Many people worried about the displacement of humankind by the new astronomy, but others delighted in it.

Pascal's older contemporary, Cardinal Bérulle, had reveled in Copernicus's discovery that the sun is the centre of the solar system. Copernicus had shown us that our minds could reach out far enough for us to understand that we are not the centre of the universe. It seemed to him that, after all, we could see that the universe was centred on God. That the sun should be the centre of the solar system pleased him. The sun symbolised divinity. The “sun of Plato” was, as St. Thomas had remarked, the Christian God.² But most important of all, Copernicus took us away from a universe centred on us.³

¹ Pascal spells it “Infini rien” with a capital “I” and no punctuation. It stands alone on a line of Manuscript 9202, “Le recueil original” in the Bibliothèque de France in Paris. See the paleographic edition of the *Pensées* edited by Zacharie Tourneur, Paris: J. Vrin, 1942, p. 307.

² *Summa Theologica*, I, 79,4.

³ These remarks are found in Discours II Section 2 of his *Discours de l'estat et des grandeurs de Jesus*, ed. François Bourgoing, *Oeuvres de Pierre Cardinal de Bérulle*, Paris, Antoine Estiene, 1644, Vol. 1, pp. 171-172 (p. 115 of the 1623 edition from the same publisher). The 1644 “works” have been reprinted, Montsoul: L'Oratoire, 1960. In this *Discours*, Bérulle says that the ancient Egyptians worshipped the sun, too, but they did so out of superstition. We are educated now, and he marvels at how God has designed the universe and our mind so that we move freely throughout the real. This, he suggests, is the real lesson and the fact that Jesus is in the world is the central truth about how God and the world are related.

Yet even for someone like Bérulle, for whom the whole natural world was a joy, there was a dark side to this story. Pascal noticed that men and women were nothing in a sense which was becoming common: We cannot find ourselves in the world described by science. Indeed, to natural science in general, men and women are nothing. Everything about them can be described in terms of something else—cells, chemical compounds, molecules, and atoms. As we understand human persons, we cannot find them in the world: The science which so impressed Pascal—and to which he contributed much—revealed only patterns of matter in space and time.

In this respect, nothing has changed. Our own science shows us as bundles of cells and genetic programmes. Those in turn are exhibited as bits of matter in space and time. In the end we will all certainly vanish into our component atoms and be unfindable.

Even if we could be put together again, would that solve our problems? If someone could prove that he was composed of all and only Napoleon's atoms, would that make such a creature the heir to Napoleon's hidden fortunes?

In these terms our lives are paradoxical. We can know everything and cannot find ourselves. Only God, in Pascal's view, can resolve the conflict. But Pascal's God is rather capricious. He is hidden from us, and even when he came to earth he did so hidden as a man and was crucified. Pascal doubted if God could survive in a world as bad as ours. God could hardly be expected to return until we had made it better. We can only hope—and bet. To bet on God's existence is in Pascal's view to act as if God exists, and that, he believed, is bound to make the world a better place. Still, the paradox remains.

~Bérulle & the Paradox of Human Nature

Pierre de Bérulle, too, for all that he welcomed Copernicus and the new science, and encouraged Descartes to put his philosophy into writing, thought that only God could explain the paradox of the human condition. In the *Discours de l'estat et des grandeurs de Jesus*⁴ he also notes that God did not make us from nothing but from "limon", the material washed down from the rivers—i.e., it is somehow the work of God in us which makes the difference between matter and persons. Thus the threat of nothingness is essentially the threat of separation from God.

In *Oeuvres de Pieté*⁵, he insists that it is in our knowledge of God that we surmount our mortality. But the issue is exactly about just how we are related to God. We get our infinity from God, but in what form? And how does it affect our prospects?

Gaston Rotureau—an Oratorian, and perhaps the most profound student of Bérulle in recent times—emphasises Bérulle's constant insistence on the mutual

⁴ IV, 7, p. 221 of Vol. 1 of the *Oeuvres* (Bourgoing edition).

⁵ *Oeuvres*, (Bourgoing edition), Vol. 2, pp. 744-745.

inter-relations between God and the world. He notes that Bérulle insisted upon a relation of equality of concern between us and God: “nous sommes pour dieu, dieu est pour nous”.⁶ Henri Bremond insisted, rightly enough, that Bérulle’s understanding of Christianity was both “anthropocentric and theocentric”⁷

In the tradition that Bérulle followed, it is the nature of the infinite that it must appear in and through the finite, but in such a way that it is demonstrably clear that the infinite can never be exhausted by the finite. The emanations of Plotinus, the logically necessary ties between the creating and the created of John the Scot and Nicholas of Cusa are examples of the ideas used in the struggles within this tradition to clarify such notions. For all of them, logic goes a considerable distance, but there is an element of the mystical in any solution.

~Maritain’s Person and Individual

In our own time, Jacques Maritain faced the same problems and his account contains many elements which can be found in philosophers like Cusa and Bérulle. But there are significant differences.

On Maritain’s account, the human intellect—which surpasses space and time—gives us access to the divine and allows us to surpass the merely natural in the sense of not having an existence which is bounded in the way that the existence of creatures without an intellect must be. Maritain hoped to reveal the human condition in a way which would not seem paradoxical, but he, too, was driven to the mystical.

Maritain would not deny the suggestion of Bérulle and many others that God must be in all things just as all things are in God, but in *Approches de Dieu* he concentrates initially on the specifics of human thought and expression.⁸ Thought transcends the limits of space and time. Free of those confines, there is a glimmering of the infinite which we share with God. Thought, however, must be expressed.

Maritain talks about thought, but perhaps the simplest example which makes the point is the word. Words are not exhausted by any or all of their expressions. One cannot wear out a word, though one becomes tired of hearing and reading it,

⁶ Gaston Rotureau, *Le Cardinal Bérulle*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1947.

⁷ H. Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, Paris, Bloud et Gay, 1916-36. (For Bérulle see Tome III, 1921.)

⁸ *Approches de Dieu*, Paris: Alsatia, 1953. Translated by Peter O’Reilly, New York: Harper, 1954, as *Approches to God*. Reprinted in Vol. 10, *Oeuvres complètes de Jacques et Raissa Maritain*, Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires de Fribourg, Suisse, 1985, pp. 14-99. Bérulle is mentioned in *Distinguer pour unir, ou les degrés du savoir*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1932, 1963, p. 582; translated by Gerald N. Phelan et al. as *Distinguish to Unite or the Degrees of Knowledge*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1959, p. 293. Reprinted in *Oeuvres* (Fribourg, Suisse), Vol. 4, 1983, p. 790. Here Maritain accuses Bérulle punningly of “oratorical” expression.

and one sometimes wishes a word would go away. We know that we cannot destroy it, yet a word is nothing over and above its expressions. It cannot live alone in some Platonic heaven. It has to be expressed. So, though thoughts are not bundles of electrical energy, they are also not some ghostly thing which lives in another world.

Maritain insists, therefore, that we must be individuals in space and time, members no doubt of the biological or some other natural order. (It is not impossible that people may someday exist all of whose parts have been replaced by bits of plastic. But they will continue to express themselves in the natural order.)

~Cusa, the Infinite & Language

Maritain accuses Nicholas of Cusa, on whom both Bérulle and Descartes in their different ways drew heavily, of trying to be a mystic while at the same time remaining a metaphysician who depends on the truths of the intellect.⁹ In a sense the charge is that Cusa does not take the mystical seriously enough or really understand the difference between metaphysical understanding and mystical experience. Nevertheless, though the differences between them are instructive, and understanding them may enable us to refine the issues, much that Cusa says is echoed by Maritain.

Maritain thinks we share in the infinite through our relations with the divine, and that it is through the expressions of thought that this relation comes to be known. Cusa thinks that it is through language—essentially because of the infinite capacity of language—that we share in the infinite. But language is, after all, the expression of thought or else is so bound up with thought that the two are inseparable. The details of the ways in which this sharing comes about are interesting, the more so since in a sense Cusa is the father of that most characteristically twentieth century preoccupation of philosophers, the philosophy of language.

The gap between us and the infinite is, Cusa says, absolute, and so he begins in a way which may seem to represent a kind of despair. The infinite is “enfolded” in everything, and yet it eludes us. Only in the Incarnation can we confront the mystery directly, for we see the perfection of the human together with what absolutely transcends the human.

The Incarnation is, however, a mystery to be reflected upon rather than a subject matter for the intellect to pronounce upon, and the best that Cusa can do is to adduce the testimony of the saints.¹⁰ In one sense, the infinite is wholly

⁹ *Distinguer pour unir*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1932, 1963, p. 476; *Distinguish to Unite*, p. 240; *Oeuvres* (Fribourg, Suisse), Vol. 4, 1983, p. 695.

¹⁰ *De Docta Ignorantia*, Book III, Chapter 4.

beyond us, and it is only to the degree that we can see it “enfolded” in the human that we can grasp it. Without this relation, it completely separates us from God.

How does it become known to us, and in what sense is it in us? We grasp it through the infinite power of language, and this power is the result of the infinite in us. We have the infinity of language and the power of creativity. Thus we become “second gods”.

Ronald Levaio has summed it up perfectly.¹¹ He says that, in *On Learned Ignorance*, Cusa’s position was that “precise truth resides only in the infinite, and since there is no proportion between the finite and the infinite”, we can never have real knowledge. Levaio notes that, because of our commitment to the infinite, we must accept the “active independent power of language” and the “creative use of symbol”, for we are representing the unrepresentable.¹² He quotes these phrases from Nancy S. Struever, who says that Cusa believed that we are especially powerful in the symbolic world.¹³ Cusa did say that “man is a second God”. He also said “for as God is creator of real entities and natural forms, so man is creator of rational entities and artificial forms.”¹⁴ Levaio notes how, for Cusa, our world becomes free of the oppression of the infinite—which by nature dwarfs our lives—because the infinite, though it is seen as the source of what can be in our world, is nonetheless distanced from it by its overwhelming otherness.¹⁵

Cusa develops these ideas in his *Vision of God*.¹⁶ In Chapter XIII, he insists that God is infinite and that “a high wall” therefore separates God and us. The expression Cusa liked is “absolute infinity”.

Notice that most of the infinities we tend to think of are *relative* infinities. The series of integers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, is infinite. So is the series 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14. But this infinity is encompassed by the categories of number and can be generated by a finite set of axioms. (One needs the concepts of zero, one, plus,

¹¹ Levaio, Ronald, *Renaissance Minds and their Fictions, Cusanus, Sidney, Shakespeare*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p. 21.

¹² *Renaissance Minds*, p. 64.

¹³ *The Language of History in the Renaissance*, Princeton: The University Press, 1970, pp. 45-46.

¹⁴ Cusa, *De Beryllo*, The text includes the words “Hominem esse secundum deum.” Cusa, *Opera Omnia*, (Heidelberg edition) Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1988, Vol. 11, p. 9. In *De Conjecturis*, II, 14, he says that man is “almost God”. He is careful to add “sed non absolute” yet “...humanus est igitur deus”, *Opera Omnia* (Heidelberg edition) 1972, Vol. 3, p. 143. The text goes on to talk of humanity as a microcosm of all there is. The power of language is discussed extensively in *Idiota de Sapientia et de Mente*, tr. with introduction and notes by M. L. Füher, Ottawa, Dovehouse editions, 1989. (Published for the University of Toronto Centre for Reformation & Renaissance Studies.)

¹⁵ *Renaissance Minds*, p. 65

¹⁶ *De Visione Dei*, written in 1453, exists, as well as in the Heidelberg edition, in an English translation by Evelyn Underhill, London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1928.

and succession, and the rule that the successor to any integer is another integer.) We cannot escape such an infinity because its properties depend on the degree of generalisation that we need for counting and hence for distinguishing the elements of our experience. The infinity is relative to, or dependent upon, the relevant categories and axioms.

We can make some sense of what Cusa says if we remember that our experience is infinite in the sense that the successor to any experience is always another experience. One cannot think, that is, of something "outside" experience and therefore one cannot think of the "boundaries" of experience in general. Our experience is also capable of infinite analysis. One always distinguishes more detail in the sense that there is no limit to the number of distinguishable elements in a Rorschach ink blot of the sort used in psychological tests. But this infinity is relative to the concepts involved, and it depends on the way in which we understand our particular finite experiences.

When Thomas Aquinas spoke of the infinite *powers* of God the infinity he spoke of was relative to the concept of power itself. Furthermore, the two forms of power—omnipotence and omniscience—are relative to one another. (For instance, to be omnipotent is to have the power to appear red to someone who cannot be deceived about colours.) Aquinas also spoke of the infinity which is the *nature* of God and which is, he insisted, absolute.

In each of the cases of relative infinity, the concepts which give rise to the infinities are capable of analysis, and logical discussions can go on about the problems which they pose: Can God make a weight too heavy for him to lift? If God knows that Jane will stand up her boyfriend on Saturday night does that imply that she had no choice in the matter?

The infinity Cusa speaks of, however, is the infinity which stems from the fact that all other finite and infinite states have certain limitations and these limitations must stem from something greater. The intellect cannot grasp this infinity directly. Cusa's conviction was that relative infinities provide no connection to the absolute infinity.

There had been many hints of this: In Anaximander, in Plato's dialogues, in Philo's discussion of the ultimately real (*Toontos on*), in the more mystical passages of Plotinus, and, of course, in St. Thomas's discussion of the way in which the infinite and the finite are related.

Yet here, almost for the first time in the literature, we encounter head on the idea of an infinity of infinities which is not expressed through a set of relative infinities and which therefore truly defies expression. It is this infinity which could be our only hope of eternal life and our only hope of establishing a relation to God.

The gap between us and it is, as Cusa insists, infinitely great. In *Distinguer pour unir*, Maritain finds the solution to the problems this creates in mystical experience, and this in turn is found in a process in which we move naturally and

gradually through the steps from sensory awareness through scientific knowledge to a philosophical understanding of metaphysics, and finally to mystical confrontation. In *Approches de Dieu*, especially in the sixth way, there is a strong continuing emphasis on intellectual understanding.

Les degrés du savoir hints at a progression like Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*. The steps are those of the *Itinerarium*, though Maritain and Bonaventure differ in one respect. Bonaventure suggests that we may find out that we are already enveloped in God, for the steps are those from illusion to reality, and in the course of them we learn that the natural universe is really a symbolic construction. Maritain insists that nature is real and objective.

Evidently, this makes Maritain's mystical solution more difficult. The material world, if it is ultimately real, must be composed of distinct and enduring parts and cannot be melded into the seamless unity of the mystic's world. In works like *La personne et le bien commun*¹⁷ as well as in *Approches de Dieu*, Maritain's insistence that the individual is a being in space and time, a species within the biological order, reflects a measure of traditional Christian theology which insists on the ultimate resurrection of the body.

Yet it is also true that in *Les degrés du savoir* Maritain really approaches Pascal's infinite through the mystical. We learn indeed that he is serious in his critique of Cusa and Bérulle, who suggest that there is a kind of rational, intellectual mysticism which leads by simple natural steps to a goal which allows us to pass imperceptibly from the affairs of the intellect and reason to the realm of the mystical.

Maritain is blunt:

"This (the envisaged successful contemplation) is essentially supernatural. There is not, as we hope to show in the next chapter, any natural mystical contemplation". He does soften his position in the next line: "There can be in a much more general sense, a natural mysticism or a natural spirituality, which stems from the natural love of God."¹⁸ But it is not clear what this concession amounts to.

It is in mystical knowledge in the strong and supernatural sense that we rise above our limitations and come to terms with the infinite. Both Maritain and the philosophers he tends to criticise as "Neoplatonists" think that the answer to the human paradox is in God. All of them have a tendency to turn to the mystical when other solutions run thin and thus to leave us with a new paradox: Perhaps Maritain is right to think that his mysticism is stronger and clearer, but does not this simply underline the difficulties?

¹⁷ Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1947; *Oeuvres* (Fribourg, Suisse), Vol. 9, 1990, pp.169-237.

¹⁸ *Distinguer pour unir*, Paris, 1932, 1963, p. 476; *Distinguish to Unite*, p. 240; *Oeuvres* (Fribourg, Suisse), Vol. 4, 1983, p. 696.

~Focusing the Difficulties

We now need to pinpoint the difficulties more precisely. One difficulty is that we do not know how to relate the knowledge derived from mystical experience to the understandings produced by reason. Suppose there is genuine mystical experience. How do we know that the infinite it leads to is the infinite or the God to whom the intellect led? This alone would explain why Cusa and Bérulle did not want to separate them as sharply as Maritain thought appropriate.

The most important difficulty, though, is about the understanding of human nature. How is it that the infinite in humanity can be expressed only in a way which seems to leave us both more and less than human? We would be more than human, of course, if we did find a mystical union with God. But we would then be less than human in the sense that the mystical experience is not a suitable context for human life and action. It is at best a sort of triumph over the human condition, and at worst a state of affairs in which the major human values—love between distinct individuals, actions directed to a good end, the richness of knowledge for its own sake, and the delight in objects which have their own perfection—would be lost.

Maritain is not unaware of all this. And we should be careful to be exact about what is at issue. The argument is not that we should eschew mystical experiences. Indeed Maritain would seek those sublime moments in which God and human persons become suffused with one another. But these are sharing in the life of God and not a substitute for our own lives. The ultimate beatific vision must involve a just balance.

What Maritain wants is a mysticism in which the intellect remains alert and in which the world will surely not dissolve into a kind of meaningless mystical mush. Indeed he speaks of “a scandal to the intellect” created by the ways in which he thinks some psychologists and others have used or misused mystical experience.¹⁹

But how is this to be achieved?

~St. Thomas & the Infinite

The answer surely has to be in a reconceptualisation of the infinite. In Question Seven of Part One of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas suggests that the infinite is to be understood as what limits the finite. There could be no finite unless something limited it. That is to say all particular finite things exist in complex systems which depend on the factors which place limits on them. It is the infinite which establishes those limits.

To be a finite thing outside an explanatory system is to be a contradiction. Something is a piece of granite only if it has a place in space and time and a locus

¹⁹ *Distinguer pour unir*, 1932, 1963, p. 569; *Distinguish to Unite*, p. 288; *Oeuvres* (Fribourg, Suisse), Vol. 4, 1983, p. 779.

within a chain of geological development. Something is an elephant only in the context of the biological system of things. Each system that we find has contexts in yet other systems. But it is this process of endless explanation which cannot go on for ever. There must be something which is the limit. St. Thomas says: “The divine being is not a being received in anything” and “God is infinite and eternal and boundless.”²⁰

The basis of at least three—and possibly all five—of the ways in which St. Thomas has demonstrated the existence of God is to be found in this principle. The first three specifically mention infinity and use it in a key premise. The fourth is about the “maximum” of each kind, and the maximum of all kinds is surely the infinite. The fifth way is about the governance of the universe by intelligence. One must suspect that the infinite is involved in that governance, too, The infinite is also what lies behind the more elaborate schema of the disjunctive transcendentals which Duns Scotus developed a little later.

This is to say that the infinite is not to be thought of in quite the mysterious way that philosophers have often seemed to suggest. The infinite is rather what is manifested in each and every instance of the finite as the ultimate shaping explanation of the system in which that finite thing is to be found.

~The Infinite and the Human Condition

How does this bear on the human being? The human being is manifested as a body in space and time. Such a body has a specific history. But the human being is also manifested in creative action-- the human being shapes the finite and does so in ways (like the use of language) which are in principle unlimited. It was in the intellect that St. Thomas located the prospective immortality of human beings.

In the notion of creative activity the question of our relation to the infinite becomes genuinely interesting: For we share in the infinite in two different ways. One is the way in which all the objects in the universe share in it simply through being limited by it. But the other is the way in which this infinite itself shapes things.

When we reflect on the fact that we are also in our modest way creators, we can see that Cusa was right. We imitate the divine—most obviously, as he thought, in our creations with words. Each of our specimens of written discourse is a kind of miniature universe. It needs to have physical expression like any other object. But in reality it can be a whole world of its own. It is not only the Bible

²⁰ Question 7, Article 1. The remark about God as eternal and boundless is a quotation ascribed by St. Thomas to Damascene.

as Northrop Frye thought which in some way is about itself.²¹ Every literary work is a little world of its own.

And any work of art—a painting and, especially, I would suggest, a piece of music—has this kind of reality. A piece of music is not usually about anything at all. It is an infinite universe within which indefinitely many interpretations are possible. So we never tire of the violin concertos of Brahms and Mendelssohn. Paintings are equally self-contained universes.

It may well be that the mystical experiences of Maritain and the saints are themselves works of art, but, if so, they are in this respect like the other sorts of artworks.²² The problem indeed is in the infinity of possible interpretations of them.

As Maritain insists, the intellect is truly beyond space and time, but not in either of the two ways which first come to mind. That is, it is not beyond space and time in the sense that it has no expression in space and time. It must have such an expression. And it is not beyond space and time in the way that a mystical experience which transcended all experiences might be. It is beyond space and time in the special sense of giving rise to its own space and time.

~And What of Immortality?

In what sense are we beyond space and time in a way which would really give rise to the notion of immortality? Only in the special sense that we live in the world and we create much of our own world. Our creative activities are rooted in a world, but they are not rooted in this particular world.

That is, it is not in this world that we find the explanation of our creative powers, but beyond it. It is because the infinite is rooted in us that we have this capacity.

This was one of the meanings traditionally given to the notion that we are created in the image of God and that we have the image of God within us. Thus John the Scot, too, says that man could only perish by losing the image of God.²³ What John believed, of course, was that the infinite is the idea of God in us. Without it we perish. We shall see the importance of this shortly.

²¹ Frye calls the Bible a “mythological universe” (*The Great Code*, Toronto: Academic Press, 1982, p. xi).

²² Perhaps this seems a strange idea. But mystical experiences can bring a new unity to what was previously disordered and open a new and apparently self-contained universe. They are thus like works of art.

²³ *Periphyseon*, 445C. The reference number is from Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 122, ed. H. J. Floss, Paris, 1853. There is an English translation by John O’Meara et al., Montréal: Bellarmin, 1987. (The *Patrologia Latina* numbers appear in the margins.)

~Individuation and Identity

The infinite cannot perish. Plato had thought that indivisibility was the best guarantee of immortality. But indivisibility is a dubious notion. Zero is indivisible. But it is not a good candidate for serious immortality. Infinity cannot perish because it is inexhaustible.

Even assuming, though, that the infinite really belongs to us—and we still have to learn just how—the question which cries out for an answer is the one which contemporary philosophers nearly always raise when the problem of death and the possibility of another life is raised. How will you know who you are in the next or any other world?

What survives that could possibly give rise to personal identity? Notice that the traditional notion of a resurrected body does not answer this question. Even St. Paul concedes that it can't quite be my original body. What would count as that? Suppose that I find myself in a body and subject to the traditional final judgement. Can I not claim that this is unfair? My new "resurrection body" may look like that of the sinner Leslie Armour but could I not urge that really I am a new person? Is God oblivious to the injustice of creating a new body and making it like that of an old sinner?

Maritain remarks that "the immortality of the soul is an immediate corollary of its spirituality."²⁴ And this must be true in so far as spirit is not something which can be encompassed by the material world. But it raises questions about the relation between spirit and the rest of us and again about the sense in which we possess spirit.

What is supposed to survive at least initially in the tradition which Maritain follows is in some sense the intellect, and Maritain at once moves to this ground. But it is also clear that he thinks the spiritual element in us is broader than mere intellect, for he says that it is rooted not only in intellectual activity but in other activities of the soul as well.

Such a centre of organising activity may give us the needed uniqueness if we can understand how it works. But it will have to be more than, say, the agent intellect, for it has always been a puzzle as to how anyone can hope to succeed in making the agent intellect distinct for each of us. After all in so far as the agent intellect embodies reason, it is and must be the same for all of us.

How shall we proceed? If we think of our intellectual and spiritual life as a creative process in which the infinite shows itself in us, then we can see that it is individuated really in the very process of creation. It may be fashionable to follow Derrida and to hold that there is no subject any longer, but it seems inevitable

²⁴ "Raison et Raisons," section 3; *Oeuvres* (Fribourg, Suisse) Vol. 9, p. 314. The original text was that of a conference at the Brooklyn Institute in 1943. A version appears in *Nova et Vetera*, Vol. 20, No.1, another as Chapter V of *The Range of Reason*, and a third as Chapter IV of *De Bergson à Thomas d'Aquin*.

that each act of creation in this sense is unique, and that, in so far as such acts in their turn, have explanatory relations they are connected. M. Derrida is not yet ready to give up his royalties. But the serious argument against him is that extended works of art like novels and symphonies and sequences of works of art, show the struggles of the creator with the material and with what he or she intends to convey. They are unintelligible without the supposition of a linking author. Brief and sporadic creations require explanation in a different way. They are unlikely as spontaneous outbursts of nature. Certainly Derrida is right to suggest that texts run together as expressions of a larger culture, that readers, listeners, and viewers areas much creators as spectators. The work of art is not the product of a single hand. But that does not mean that it is the product of no hand at all.

Indeed this relation between the original author and a myriad of co-creators is a natural model for the relation between us and God rather than a model for a world in which there is no author at all. But all of these creations depend on fathomless notions like that of the infinity of language.

It is our access to infinity which underlies human creation, certainly in literature and music. This throws us back on infinity in a new sense. But if the infinite in us is what limits and shapes the finite through its creations, can it render each of us distinct?

~The Theistic Hypothesis

It can do so only, perhaps, on a theistic hypothesis. Suppose that God exists and God has exemplary ideas of the things which compose the world. Suppose also that God has an idea of each of us. Then for each of us he has an idea. Such ideas are ideas of beings who have ideas of themselves. The divine arrangement is that each of us is a subordinate creator. This relation of subordination means that each of us starts differently with a unique capacity and a unique perspective. It is this perspective which continues through whatever lives we have. It seems to follow, of course, that if God should form an idea of all or any of us as nonexistent we would cease to exist.

Now this relation is not, after all, *altogether* unknown to us. When Shakespeare created Hamlet, Hamlet took on a certain life of his own. In the minds of those who encounter him, he gives rise to a potential infinity of interpretations. So it is with the music of Brahms or Elgar or Havergal Brian. The concert hall is always full of surprises. Even the Mendelssohn violin concerto that we have heard a thousand times is by no means worn out.

Subordinate creations—the creations of which human beings are capable—need a milieu in which to function, and minds in which to continue to exist. If God exists, his creations will be more powerful than ours since we are subordinate in a precise sense. A theistic theory would entail the doctrine that,

any way, we live out our lives in the milieu which is ultimately the mind and world of God.

But why should it not be so?

We may ask whether or not God exists, but the whole point of the argument is that the infinite is unavoidable. It intrudes everywhere. We cannot do mathematics without it, and we cannot do physics without mathematics. And what Cusa called “the absolute infinite” is God.

This model needs a little more exploration.²⁵ If God is to be identified with the infinite (and philosophers as different as St. Thomas and Blaise Pascal are wont to make this identification) then we need to know more. We have to ask in what sense and how such a God can have exemplary ideas and what sorts of things they are. A workable answer seems to be the one that St. Thomas suggests in Question Eight of Part One of the *Summa Theologica*. The ideas are further explored in later discussions about knowledge and angels (ST I, q 54). His answer is not wholly different from the answer that the Neoplatonist philosophers would give: The infinite cannot just be an empty indefiniteness. It has to be the fount of forms and give rise to the world.

St. Thomas, however, gives it a significantly different twist, insisting that the infinite is an activity which is present throughout the world. He says “as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it” and that “God is in all things... as an agent.”²⁶ God, he says in the same article, is everywhere. God provides the form through which things are. It is in the activity of providing form that God is the author of particular things and states of affairs, though there is a different sense in which the infinite is the source of everything as well. But this again is to say that the infinite is what makes the finite finite.

The suggested model of the divine ideas is not a model of *representative* ideas of the sort often ascribed to Descartes and Locke—though denied by Malebranche—but a model of *constitutive* ideas. The divine ideas are the forms of the world. God is the being which “is innermost in each thing”.

If we need the infinite and if the infinite is the being “innermost in each thing”—that is, if we need forms to make sense of the world—then this seems a plausible hypothesis. The forms, of course, will include the forms of beings capable of having ideas of themselves, which in their turn become, as Cusa thought, forms constitutive of new things. Just how are we related to the infinite?

St. Thomas explores these ideas further in Question 54 of Part I of the *Summa Theologica*. There he speaks (Article 2, response to objection 2) of the absolutely infinite as it occurs in the processes of knowing and willing. The object of the understanding is truth as such and the object of the will is the good. The true and

²⁵ There is more about it in my *Being and Idea*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1992, but I shall tackle the question of ideas a little differently here.

²⁶ *Summa Theologica* I, 8,1

the good are both infinite and, in Thomas's view, convertible with being itself. Aquinas contrasts this with the "relative infinity" in the act of sensing. For, though we can sense anything sensible, all sensibles are finite. He insists of course, that only God is infinite absolutely, though it follows as James H. Robb argues, that there is a clear sense in which the human spirit is infinite.²⁷ The discussion in Question 54 is about angels and how they know, but willing and understanding are human activities as well. Their infinite objects are, however, the nature of God.

In this case our chances of immortality are tied, as John the Scot thought, to the retention of this "image of God",²⁸ but this seems at least possible.

The alternative seems to be to abandon our association with the infinite or to lapse with M. Derrida into an infinity of unintelligibility. But perhaps the very idea of an infinity of unintelligibility is itself unintelligible. Kurt Gödel and the great logicians have brought home to us the fact that the intelligibility of the world depends on a mathematics which depends on a notion of infinity, and Noam Chomsky has said the same thing about language.

²⁷ *Man as Infinite Spirit*, The Aquinas Lecture, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1974.

²⁸ This is hardly the conventional view of the image of God, but it is a plausible one, one which brings home to us both our relation to the infinite nature and our responsibility for our own creative capacities.