EXPERIENCE AND ITS CLAIM TO UNIVERSALITY

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From the Christian point of view, everything, indeed everything, ought to serve for upbuilding. The kind of scholarliness and scienticity that ultimately does not build up is precisely thereby unchristian.
—Anti-Climacus, *The Sickness Unto Death*

Does experience hold us open to the whole of reality? And if so, how are we to understand this achievement of experience? By unfolding the path of an answer to this complex set of questions, the subsequent meditation is intended as an approach to the even more comprehensive question about the nature of experience as such.[1]

Experience is arguably one of the most difficult topics for the philosopher and the theologian to tackle. Experience is exceedingly elusive, manifold, and simultaneously common. Experience embraces two polar extremes: on the one hand, in its autobiographical particularity, experience is virtually ineffable. Yet on the other

[1]The topic and its specific formulation were given to me. An earlier version of this essay was delivered 3 December 2009, at the international symposium "The Nature of Experience: Issues in Science, Culture, and Theology" at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. The final version profited considerably from the dialogical "communio" of interlocutors, first before the symposium with Thomas Joseph White, O.P., during the symposium thanks to various specific interventions and to the general discussion, and finally after the symposium in private correspondence with John McCarthy and in dialogue with Paul Griffiths and Nancy Heitzenrater Hütter.

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hand, insofar as it is a function of human nature, experience has universal formal characteristics. It is because of the simultaneity of these two extremes of every human experience that all experience is analogically related, to the effect that experience can indeed be communicated and hence shared so that by way of the operation of analogical imagination and the capacity of empathy[2] I can understand the experiences of others to a certain degree and, in some instances, by way of assimilating them, even deepen and qualify my own reservoir of experiences stored in memory. Hence, Terence might very well have a reasonable case when he claims, "Homo sum: nihil humanum mihi alienum est." "I am a human being, so nothing human is strange to me."

1. The three linguistic registers of "experience"

Because experience is such an elusive reality, I would like to get a preliminary handle on the characteristic constituents of experience by paying attention to its grammar. In ordinary English, "experience" is found in primarily three grammatical functions. First, as a transitive verb: "Have you ever experienced a sunrise in the summer on the top of a mountain?" Second, in an intransitive sense as composite with the verb "to have": "I always look forward to having a new experience" (related to this use is the simple use of the noun with "to be": "This was a wonderful experience!"). Third, as an adjective qualifying some agent or practitioner: "She is an experienced teacher," or as a noun without any article to indicate the same: "She has experience as a teacher." The verbal and adjectival uses will help us get a handle on the formal characteristics of experience.

The transitive verb—"to experience something"—registers the incessant influx of reality on our senses, with differing intensity insofar as the focus of our intentionality selects segments relevant to the particular end we happen to pursue. Irrespective of this ordinary selection by way of the particular end I pursue, of course, any other

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[2]Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraud Stein (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989). For an instructive introduction to Stein's book, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue 1913–1922* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 75–87.

aspect of this influx of reality can be singled out by the focus of my mind's intentionality.[3] I might become attracted—or distracted—by a breathtakingly beautiful sunset as I sit writing an article by the window of my study. Or I might suddenly become aware of the recurring sound of a timer indicating that the food in the oven is ready while focusing very hard on formulating a complex argument on paper. In short, in the first linguistic register, "experience is a knowledge of singulars."[4]

Now, as soon as this focus of our intentionality is sustained at length on some smaller or larger, more or less complex particular of the overall influx and becomes reflective (and possibly interactive), we speak of "having an experience." There are at least three indispensable prerequisites to having an experience: (1) agent intentionality focused on some end (normally this end is not a specific experience one wants to have, but it also can be just some specific experience one indeed wants to have); (2) some set of experiences stored in memory that allow for some kind of "background" to the new—or the same—experience I have[5]; and (3) a complex set of judgments I make in the course of assessing and thereby having the experience. Only by way of these judgments do I have the experience and consequently am I able to narrate the experience as my experience. (The question concerning how these judgments are informed by my character, that is, by the specific habituation into particular virtues and vices, is an important one, but must be postponed at this point.) When one or more of these four aspects are missing, I might still continuously experience something, because, after all, I am alive. In such a case, however, I have not had an experience.

It is in light of the accumulation of having had many experiences relevant to specific practices (widely conceived) (which usually entails another adjacent, but different sense of "experienced:"

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[3]The influx of reality that is taken in by my senses is larger than what my intentionality selects. Hence, pertaining to the flux of reality on the senses, "experience" in this widest and least structured sense of the first linguistic register is not necessarily intentional or even conscious.

[4]Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.1 981a15–16.

[5]Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.1 980b29–981a2: "In [human beings], experience comes into being from memory. For many memories of the same thing results in the capacity for one experience" (trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle).

having performed something often) that we apply the adjective "experienced" to a person as a practitioner: an experienced teacher or architect, an experienced sailor or conductor, an experienced judge, confessor, or bishop. When we use the adjective "experienced" as a descriptor from the spectator's perspective, the equivalent verbal expression about myself or some other experienced practitioner would be "to have experience" in this or that regard, "experience" now as the stored accumulation of having had many experiences of some kind. (Significantly, we do not tend to talk about an experienced saint—in the sense of "experienced in sainthood"—for being a saint transcends each and every practice of which we could become experienced practitioners. I shall return to this noteworthy exception at the end of these reflections.)

In order fully to appreciate the difference between "having an experience" and "having experience" in this or that regard, it is significant to register that in other languages the difference between these two linguistic registers is marked by the way the verb "to make" ("machen," "faire") is reserved to indicate the second linguistic register ("die Erfahrung machen," "faire l'expérience") while the verb "to have" ("haben," "avoir,") is reserved to indicate the third linguistic register ("Erfahrung haben," "avoir l'expérience"). Quite apart from the specific distinctions observed in each of these languages, the German and the French remind us better than the English that the second linguistic register, significantly, involves both an "undergoing," a "suffering," (experiencing reality whether we like it or not) and a "doing" or a "making," or active participation in and contribution to having an experience. Differently put, it seems that the experience we have ("machen," "faire"), depends to some degree at least on the kind of person we are, that is more precisely, on the kind of character we have acquired. In short, "having an experience" is not only dependent upon the above-mentioned three prerequisites but, moreover, is a function of human character as acquired by way of operation. The third prerequisite, the making of judgments, is the instance where this difference in character becomes most tangible. For the judgments of a virtuous person are different from the judgments of an incontinent or a vicious person.

I have suggested thus far that experience appears in three linguistic registers that allow us to get an initial handle on the nature of experience: first, to experience, second, to have an experience, and third, to be an experienced practitioner of some kind. The third

register obviously presupposes the second register, and the second register presupposes the first register. Inversely, the first comes to fruition in the second, the second comes to fruition in the third.

2. The conditio humana*: contingency, temporality, finality*

With these three linguistic registers in the back of our mind, we can take the next step and consider the nature of experience in light of the human condition in general. For it seems to be undeniable that the nature of experience is configured by the same characteristics that are structurally constitutive of the *conditio humana*: contingency, temporality, and finality.

There is, first, the fundamental *contingency* of the reality in which I find myself: biological, historical, cultural-linguistic, social, and religious. Experience is made possible by any of these factors, and is therefore also dependent upon them. Because experience is primordially configured by the ten categories or predicamentals and because human embodiment, linguisticality, and transcendentality are constitutive of a universally shared condition, the particularity resulting from the constant variations among these factors does not escape this fundamental condition and hence can never result in an absolute incommensurability of experience.[6] Hence, we can assume that most human experiences are, at least in principle, communicable. In particular instances, though, it might turn out that certain experiences are virtually incommunicable. These tend to be liminal experiences of surpassing charity, happiness, and joy or of extreme horror, pain, and humiliation. Such experiences form the exception that confirms the rule. For, arguably in most cases, these experiences can be isolated, identified, and thus "marked" as such ineffable, liminal experiences inside a wider matrix of experiences that are integrated and therefore communicable.

There is, second, *temporality*: experience means being conditioned by the irreversible arrow of time, not only in a physical, but also in an existential sense. I live in the indivisible flow of past, present, and future, and there is no experience that is not configured in this threefold way by, first, memory, second, awareness and

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[6]See Aristotle, *Categories* and *Posterior Analytics* B 19 (99b ff.).

judgment, and third, anticipation.[7] Past, present, and future receive their internal coherence and finitude (which are the same) from a "*finis*" or "*terminus*" toward which my life is moving, an irreversible finality of which death is one—albeit only one—integral component. This finality is like the mathematical value in front of the bracket inside of which each experience is made and by which each experience is qualified.

The consideration of this irreversible "*finis*" already touches upon the third characteristic: *finality or teleology*. Experience in the second and third register (and arguably also in the first) is linguistically configured so that, as remembered experience, it becomes part of a narrative that is governed by some end. (In this respect a human life reflects the structure of human agency which in turn reflects the structure of the intellect in the order of intention: the end is first in apprehension and last in realization.) Experiences in the first linguistic register that cannot be had by way of judgments and thus be integrated as remembered experience (in the second linguistic register) are failed candidates of experience, what we call nowadays "traumatic." (Again, the question of how our judgments are informed is important, but must be postponed until later.) What we have come to see so far is that, if we fail to develop and exercise such judgments successfully, the constant flux of experience (first linguistic register) cannot be meaningfully sorted, interpreted, and remembered as experiences we have had (second linguistic register);

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[7]There is an important exception, though, and this is mystical experience, which is essentially atemporal. It is crucial, here, to distinguish between natural mystical experience and a genuinely supernatural mystical experience. The former, natural mystical experience, is a "mysticism of deliverance" or a "mysticism of escape from time," as Georges Cardinal Cottier, O.P., felicitously put it in "On Natural Mysticism" (*Surnaturel: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-Century Thomistic Thought*, ed. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P. [Ave Maria, Fla.: Sapientia Press, 2009], 273–94; 282). (For a profound philosophical interpretation of this kind of experience, see Jacques Maritain, "L'expérience mystique naturelle et le vide," in Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 7 [Paris: Éditions Saint-Paul, 1988], 159–95.) The latter, supernatural mystical experience and contemplation, is an affective connaturality by way of infused charity of the soul with the unfathomable depths of God's triune life. For a classical study of the latter, see John G. Arintero, O.P., *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*, 2 vols., trans. Jordan Aumann, O.P. (St. Louis/London: Herder, 1949).

and therefore we will be unable to recollect and narrate them to ourselves and others.[8]

If it is true that—as Aquinas holds—judgment appertains to wisdom, the wise person is the one with the most experiences to have and to share, and the saint, who participates in some excellent way in the infused gifts of the Holy Spirit—that is, among them in the gift of infused wisdom—is the one who suffers and hence experiences divine things.[9] Such "*patiens divina*," such an experience of divine things, however, does not fall under the set of ordinary experiences and hence is not a univocal candidate for integration into the narrative of one's life, this narrative being understood from a spectator's perspective (whether the spectator is oneself or someone else).

3. The qualitative perfection of experience (second linguistic register)

The narrative structure that I invoked earlier implies more than the threefold configuration of human nature. For we must consider also the difference between nature and operation or act, that is, the difference between the nature of a substance (first perfection) and the operation of the substance in virtue of its nature (second perfection).[10] In short, in moving from the first to the

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[8]See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's "On Memory and Recollection,"* chapters 1–8. While reproductive memory is a merely sensitive type of memory, recollective memory and the ensuing narration result from a complex interaction between intellect and will. In short, the act of recollection is a morally significant operation of the intellect in which truth and falsehood are at stake in the form of veracity and self-deception (duplicity toward oneself). In short, the recollection of experiences we have had is informed by those judgments that have shaped our moral character. For a fascinating study of the moral character of recollection and the will to self-deception, see Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle With Truth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

[9]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (*ST*) I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3: "Since judgment appertains to wisdom, the twofold manner of judging produces a twofold wisdom. A man may judge in one way by inclination. . . . The first manner of judging divine things belongs to that wisdom which is set down among the gifts of the Holy Ghost: *The spiritual man judgeth all things* (1 Cor 2:15). And Dionysius says (*Div. Nom.* ii.): *Hierotheus is taught not by mere learning, but by experience of divine things* [*patiens divina*]."

[10]John Rziha, *Perfecting Human Actions: St. Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation*

second to the third linguistic register, a qualitative perfection of experience is connoted that does not depend on the common structure of human nature, but rather on the specific operation of each particular human person.

Pertaining to operation we must first consider the end, the *telos*. Experience in the second and third linguistic register is a function of the overarching end toward which an agent is directed. For this end, first and foremost the final supernatural end (the triune God to be enjoyed eternally in the beatific vision), desired unconditionally and explicitly by way of sanctifying grace in faith, hope, and charity, but secondarily some version of the proximate natural end (the flourishing of the human being as a rational animal), will constitute the overarching framework in, and the kinds of judgments by way of which, experiences are had and in which one becomes an experienced practitioner of this or that sort.

In regard to operation, we must not only consider the *telos* of operation, but also the excellence of operation, that is, *virtue*. The experience a virtuous person has is different from the one who lacks the habituation in the cardinal virtues (prudence, courage, temperance, justice), let alone the infusion with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (and the ensuing infused moral virtues).[11] More importantly, the virtuous person has essentially other kinds of experiences than the incontinent or the vicious person does. While in the first register of experience the general influx of reality is arguably roughly the same for all human beings qua rational animals (within a spectrum of biological and cultural variations), the virtuous person arrests his attention at different points than the incontinent or the vicious person does, and if at the same point, then in a different way and within a different context of stored experiences. It is for this reason that the virtuous person has different kinds of experiences from the vicious person. Consequently and significantly, not all experiences are communicable along the incremental gradation of a simple structural analogy. Rather, this structural analogy is qualified

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in Eternal Law (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 43–66.

[11]On the important but complex topic of the supernaturally infused moral virtues, see the instructive essay by Michael Sherwin, O.P., "Infused Virtue and the Effects of Acquired Vice: A Test Case for the Thomistic Theory of Infused Cardinal Virtues," *The Thomist* 73 (2009): 29–52.

by a non-symmetric analogy of perfection. Because act or perfection is prior to potency and because the good is a perfection while evil is a privation, the saint can understand the kind of experience a villain has, but the villain cannot understand the kinds of experience a saint has.[12]

4. *The tacit prerequisites for "having an experience"*

Let us now turn to the second register in some more detail. For there obtains a certain internal dynamic structure to "having an experience." An experience can be had only in light of some previous experience and insofar as it opens one up to further experiences. Since there obviously cannot be an infinite regress, all essentially antecedent experiences—before we begin to have our own—are analogically received by way of shared stories, be these stories shared by our parents, grandparents, or other relatives and friends of the family, or teachers, or be they stories we read as children on our own. This analogically received experience is already linguistically configured and culturally mediated, that is, we receive this experience by always already belonging to an antecedent community of language and culture. This inescapable fact, though, does not entail any essential incommunicability of experience between differing linguistic communities. Rather, there is always already operative in any analogical assimilation of the experiences of different communities of language and culture the similarity in difference between one's own first acquired language and the subsequent acquiring of another language to the point of competency and fluency in this second language.[13]

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[12]The verb "understand" is used in this instance, of course, analogically. The villain is in a strict and proper sense unable to understand the very kinds of experience (which is an abundance of kinds) the saint has, while the saint is indeed able to understand, albeit only in an improper, accidental sense, the one kind of experience a villain has, that is, what it is like to be habitually malicious, for the latter—habitual malice—is simply the absence of a good.

[13]See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 364; 370–80. Could the arguably quite tangible poverty of experience in the late modern world of predominantly simulated reality be at least partially due to the largely broken intergenerational web of analogically received experiences, the "first school in reality" for many

There is, however, a tacit horizon even to these antecedent, derivative, and culturally-linguistically received experiences. I am not thinking, now, about the first linguistic register, "experiencing" (where the fundamental tacit background obviously is a well-functioning coordination between the senses, the sense appetite, the intellect, and the intellectual appetite), but about the second linguistic register, "having an experience." The primordial, tacit horizon of every human being in regard to this register is the child's original relationship to the mother, whence "mother tongue" (*Muttersprache*). Every human being finds him- or herself in this original relationship of radical dependency that is characterized by nurture, as well as an original communication of love and care by way of the maternal touch, voice, and gaze.[14] Child psychology has shown us that when this initial relationship of unconditional love is disturbed or the communication of love is gravely deficient, a child's capacity to have and to be open to new experiences may be severely damaged.

The capacity "to have an experience," of course, does not only depend on this primordial, tacit horizon of maternal love. Rather, it is also the developed reflective apparatus of the intellect, as well as the memory of previous experiences (be they our own or analogically received experiences) and the openness to new experi-

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generations, which has rather abruptly—and with disastrous consequences—gone out of business? While this might be difficult to verify by way of hard data, it strikes me as a question worth pondering.

[14]Retrospectively, in light of revelation and divine faith, a theologically inspired ontological contemplation can very well come to understand that the tacit horizon of experience goes "all the way down." Such a contemplation will recognize that indeed God's "play of love" has already begun primordially in the love each mother radiates to her newborn child; moreover, that the child's experience of the mother's love gathers all sense impressions into the Thou of the mother such that by awakening to love, the child awakens to knowledge. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glaubhaft ist nur die Liebe* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1963; 6th ed., 2000), 49 (Eng.: *Love Alone Is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004]). In light of God's self-communication as love (1 Jn 4: 8, 16), von Balthasar sees the primordial relationship of love—the relationship between mother and child that is the beginning of all experiencing for the child—as a truth that illuminates analogically a deeper theological truth: as no child can awaken to love without being loved antecedently and unconditionally by the mother, so no human heart can attain an understanding of the God of love without the free antecedent and unconditional gift of grace.

ences that are necessary conditions for "having an experience" in the first place. This is one of the reasons why the young, even if they are bright and flourish in the primordial, tacit horizon of unconditional parental love, are not necessarily able to "have an experience" and why the old, as soon as they cease to be open to new experiences, cease to have any experiences at all. Indeed, ceasing to be open to and having no new experiences is identical with having become old. It is at this point that we can specify that "having an experience" is only possible in the horizon of "having a new experience." It might turn out not really to be a new one, I might have had this experience before, but I only had it—again— because I was open to having a new experience in the first place. And for a sustained openness to having new experiences one needs to develop, as we will shortly see, the virtues of humility and magnanimity.

5. The status viatoris *and its two virtues: humility and magnanimity*

When we consider more closely the openness to having new experiences as the condition for the possibility of having any experiences at all, we come to realize that the *conditio humana* (contingency, temporality, finality) is in need of a more precise and more profound determination: we shall call it the *status viatoris*, the pilgrim status of the human being.[15] This singular status among creatures denotes the condition of an embodied rational creature ordained to and equipped for a fulfillment that infinitely transcends the natural end of the rational animal. Because of this ordination and equipment, the *viator* or *peregrinator* is essentially open to the whole

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[15]One of the most stimulating, profound, and constructive philosophical interpreters of Aquinas's thought in the twentieth century has been Josef Pieper. In conversation with Heidegger and Bloch he developed the difference between the *status viatoris* and the *status comprehensoris* into a full-fledged philosophical anthropology. The original seed is to be found in the chapter, "Bemerkungen über den Begriff des status viatoris," in his early, very small but very influential book *Über die Hoffnung* (Leipzig: Hegner, 1935), 11–23. For later developments, see the instructive study by Bernard N. Schumacher, *A Philosophy of Hope: Josef Pieper and the Contemporary Debate on Hope*, trans. D. C. Schindler (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), esp. 39–63.

of reality, especially also the reality of transcendence in general and the reality of the supernatural in particular.

When we consider the *viator*'s openness to the whole of reality, we need to consider two specific virtues that are indispensable to sustain this openness for the whole of reality in the order of human operation: *humility* and *magnanimity*. At this point my indebtedness to Thomas Aquinas (already operative in the previous considerations) finally becomes explicit.[16] We make all our experiences as essentially embodied and therefore timed beings.[17] Hence we need to attend to the question how our bodies are involved in our experiences. The way they are, Thomas would suggest, is first and foremost by way of the passions. Passions are acts of the sense appetite caused by a sense apprehension or imagination that immediately affect the body, but also pertain to the rational soul "*per accidens*," that is, insofar as the soul is united with the body.[18] The passion of hope is most essential for human life, for, as Thomas states, "hope is a movement of the appetitive power ensuing from the apprehension of a future good, difficult but possible to obtain; namely, a stretching forth of the appetite to such a good."[19]

The strength of the movement of this appetitive power is proportionate to our present capacities, as well as to the nature of the good we aim to attain. Such hope is common and indeed indispensable to the human condition. Hope moves us constantly toward all

[16]For a somewhat more extensive discussion of the virtues of humility and magnanimity in the context of the theological virtue of hope, see my essay "'In hope he believed against hope' (Rom 4:18). Faith and Hope, Two Pauline Motifs as Interpreted by Aquinas: A Re-lecture of Pope Benedict XVI's Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*," *Nova et Vetera: The English Edition of the International Theological Journal* 7 (2009): 839–67.

[17]On the different relationship in animals and humans between sense apprehension and time, see *ST* I, q. 78, a. 4 and Aquinas' *Commentary on Aristotle's "On Memory and Recollection,"* chapter 2. On the role of the passions in general, see *ST* I-II, qq. 22–48.

[18]Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 22, a. 1. For the most recent commentaries on this fascinating, but complex topic in Aquinas' thought, see Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of* Summa Theologiae *1a2ae 22–48* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Diana Fritz Cates, *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious Ethical Inquiry* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009); and Paul Gondreau, "The Passions and the Moral Life: Appreciating the Originality of Aquinas," *The Thomist* 71 (2007): 419–50.

[19]*ST* I-II, q. 40, a. 2.

kinds of arduous goods not yet attained. When we realize that a desirable good, difficult to obtain, is in principle in reach and with persistence and effort of will can be attained, hope moves us toward this good. Such an ordinary hope arises solely from our specific capacities, skills, faculties, as well as the experiences we have had, and is consequently also limited by them.[20]

The virtues correlative to this appetitive power or "passion" of hope are humility and magnanimity. Remember, the object of the passion of hope is "a future good, difficult but possible to obtain," and the passion of hope "a movement of the appetitive power," "a stretching forth of the appetite to such a good."[21] Thomas characterizes this appetite as "irascible" (in contradistinction to a "concupiscible appetite"), because the former is directed to all kinds of goods that are hard to obtain and the obtaining of which might involve the overcoming of difficult obstacles. For the irascible appetite to be rightly governed by reason, namely, to be aiming at attaining the just mean, it must be informed by two specific moral virtues. Humility (rooted in the cardinal virtue of temperance) moderates the passion of hope and thus assists it in acting in conformity with the rule of reason.[22] Magnanimity (rooted in the cardinal virtue of courage) strengthens the passion of hope and directs attention to the subject of the moral act by aiming at the accomplishment of great deeds, as well as at the requisite honors that accompany the attainment of greatness.[23] Because of the central and sustaining role that magnanimity plays in governing the passion of hope, some interpreters of

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[20] *ST* I-II, q. 40, a. 5.

[21] *ST* I-II, q. 40, a. 2.

[22] See *ST* I-II, q. 18, a. 5; q. 55, a. 2; q. 85, a. 2. Because the form of the human being is the rational soul, human beings are naturally inclined to act in accord with reason. The good action is the one that is in accord with reason. Humility moderates the acts of the irascible sense appetite such that the human being is not "driven" by the irascible passions, but rather can attend to the rule of reason—while at the same time letting the irascible sense appetite do its proper job—stretching forth toward the arduous good possible to attain: "When a passion forestalls the judgment of reason, so as to prevail on the mind to give its consent, it hinders counsel and the judgment of reason. But when it follows that judgment, as through being commanded by reason, it helps towards the execution of reason's command" (*ST* I-II, q. 59, a. 2, ad 3).

[23] *ST* II-II, q. 129, a. 1.

Aquinas have understood, with good reason, the natural virtue of magnanimity as the natural virtue of hope.[24]

Now, every experience is had in light of some end (and the experience itself might be in some specific cases such an end).[25] Simultaneously, the capacity of "having an experience" and the perfectibility of this capacity are entailed in the structure of human nature. Because every end is a desired good to which the passion of hope is directed, the perfection of "having experiences" requires the virtue of humility as well as the virtue of magnanimity, that is, the natural virtue of hope. For it is by way of humility that we become increasingly attentive to the dictates of reason and hence increasingly attentive and eager to have certain experiences instead of others. And it is by way of magnanimity, the aiming at the accomplishments of great deeds, that we stretch out to having new experiences of certain kinds and do not settle with some fixed acquired store of experiences. It becomes clear that in regard to the third linguistic register, that is, in regard to becoming an experienced practitioner of some practice, the development of the virtues of humility and magnanimity are indispensable.[26]

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[24]See R.-A. Gauthier, O.P., *Magnanimité: L'idéal de la grandeur dans la philosophie païenne et dans la théologie chrétienne* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1951), esp. 295–371. The text of Aquinas most centrally in support of understanding magnanimity as the natural virtue of hope is *In Sent.* III, d. 26, q. 2, a. 2, ad 4: "Sed tamen magnanimitas non est idem quod spes virtus; quia est circa arduum quod consistit in rebus humanis, non circa arduum quod est deus; *unde non est virtus theologica, sed moralis, participans aliquid a spe*" (my emphasis).

[25]Remember that every experience that one "has" is an experience in the second linguistic register. Hence, experiences like the experience of undergoing pain (not as part of achieving an overarching end, like reaching the finish line of a marathon) that arises from an incurable disease remain in the first linguistic register, an undergoing that cannot be integrated at all. Even such extreme undergoing and suffering is, however, not completely closed off from the possibility of an integration, albeit a supernatural integration by way of the gift of divine faith. For a profound meditation on this possibility, see Pope John Paul II's 1984 apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* (On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering).

[26]Now we can also understand why a practice is more than a set of skills. For to become experienced in a set of skills requires only the accumulation of a certain technical versatility. But to acquire and exercise certain skills does not at all entail that we are having new experiences in the sense of "having an experience" (second linguistic register). Being open to the latter, however, is indispensable for becoming an experienced practitioner of some practice.

6. Our experience with experience

I postponed until now the consideration of what at first glance might seem to be—next to contingency, temporality, and finality—a fourth factor configuring experience. But this is not the case. For the reflexivity of experience I am concerned about here pertains only to experience in the second as well as the third linguistic register. Such reflexivity of experience gives rise to a "second order" experience with experience and eventually results in "having experience" not merely as a practitioner of this or that practice but also as a human being per se. Such a second order experience with experience does, first and foremost, include the realization that no amount of experience can ever prepare us for a genuinely new experience, and that a liminal or extreme experience might at any time change the whole framework of our previous experiences. It is this kind of "experience with experience" that profoundly complicates the narrative integration of our experiences into a comprehensive narrative such that all narration (while indispensable for "having an experience") will remain preliminary and, hence, ultimately fragmentary. Remember that even the most comprehensive autobiographical narrative will inevitably remain incomplete. For it is written from a perspective that does not include yet the death (and, as the Christian faith teaches us, arguably the resurrection) of its narrator. And because I cannot observe and therefore narrate my own death, let alone judge my own life justly from a transcendent point of view that comprehends the whole of my life, the spectator's perspective on which any narrative depends remains inherently preliminary and fragmentary—unless we come to understand that the universe was intentionally created (as it indeed was) and is intentionally governed and directed toward a surpassing perfection (as it indeed is). In this case there is indeed a perfect narrator of my life. And because my life is narrated by the One who created me together with the whole world and in whom the perfections of love and justice are undivided, divine judgment means receiving the narration of my life from God, that is, with a narrative accuracy that can only be achieved by the surpassing unity of charity and justice.

Let us return to the reflexivity of experience, the second order experience with experience. Such reflexivity is a potency, that is, it is dependent upon contingency, temporality, and finality: it might happen or not happen; and when it indeed happens, it is

always "timed" and subject to finitude and informed by the kind of end toward which we are directed. For this reason—and contrary to all idealist dreams—this reflexivity does not per se elevate the human subject to the plane of some natural transcendence of reflexivity that is the result of reason's conscious experience with its own experiences—a quasi self-perfecting of reason by way of the dialectics of experience.[27] On the contrary, such experience with experience makes me intensely aware of the fragility, the fallibility and hence the fundamental limitation of my experiences—how little they indeed prepare me for liminal or extreme experiences—and hence how difficult, if not impossible, it is actually to make Terence's dictum my own—a dictum either all too presumptuous or all too terrible.

A person experienced in this reflexive sense is a person who not only becomes such by way of reflecting upon the experiences she or he had but also, and more importantly, a person who remains open to new experiences. For every genuinely new experience is in some respect a negation of some previous experience and of an expectation arising from this previous experience. There simply cannot be a genuinely new experience without the disappointment of some expectation. The "crossing," the death of such expectations that every genuinely new experience causes, eventually yields the kind of hard-earned insight that we could not have come by in any other way.[28]

7. *The* status viatoris *and the experience of experience*

Sustaining such reflexivity and the insights yielded by it over a longer period of time is difficult, if not impossible, without a fundamental form of surrender: a surrender to the truth which these insights entail. It is the truth of man's *status viatoris*, that is, not merely the truth of radical historical existence (the reflexive

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[27] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, par. 7; ed. Georg Lasson, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Meiner, 1911), 38f. For an extensive analysis and a sustained critique of Hegel's concept of experience, see Martin Heidegger, "Hegels Begriff der Erfahrung," in id., *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1950; 7th ed. 1994), 114–208.

[28] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1975), 338.

awareness of temporality),[29] but the twin-truths of natality (having been born, having come into existence as a new beginning)[30] and of the finality that expresses itself irrepressibly in the human search for knowledge and happiness, the search for a fulfillment of intellect and will that human agency cannot achieve, that our finitude and the fragility of human affairs seem constantly to frustrate, but that human beings nevertheless seek with the deepest longing.

The refusal of surrendering to the truth of the *status viatoris* can take two forms. First, and most frequently, is the attempt at an alleged self-protection from the truth: cynicism. The cynic who has seen it all and knows it all, who has always already been there and done it and whom therefore no new experience can ever touch and wound anymore, prefers a death to experience to the vulnerability that is inherent in remaining open to all of reality and hence to inherently unpredictable and therefore genuinely new experiences. What the cynic forgoes is any genuine insight that can only be gained by the death to expectations to which previous experiences gave rise. The "wisdom" of the cynic is nothing but the well-camouflaged absence of insight, the mark of a truly wise person.

Besides the misplaced attempt at self-protection, cynicism, there is another form of refusing to surrender to the truth of the *status viatoris*: despair, that is, giving up each and every attempt at "having experiences," that is, despairing at the arduous but necessary work of integrating and narrating experience. Despair is to give oneself up to "non-sense," to the mere flux of experiencing in the first linguistic register. Experiencing in the second and third linguistic register unavoidably involves work, disappointment, pain, unsettling insights (and potentially and most unsettling, surrendering to the truth, that is, conversion). The flight of despair embraces the first linguistic register as all there is to experience and interprets the other two registers cynically, as quasi-technological, purely linguistic competencies that allow the intelligent animal that the human is to cope successfully with its complex environment. This despair about the *status viatoris* with all its metaphysical and religious entailments settles for understanding the human animal as at best somewhat more intelligent than other animals.

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[29]Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, ibid.

[30]On "natality," see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958; 2nd ed. 1998), 243–47.

Sustaining the reflexivity of experience is only possible by way of a conscious embrace of the *status viatoris* and an intentional cultivation of the virtues required for the existence and flourishing of the *viator*: humility and magnanimity. The former, humility, protects the *viator* from cynicism, because humility keeps the *viator* ever attentive to the manifold "given" of reality itself and to the rule of reason that allows for right reception of reality's gratuity. The latter, magnanimity, protects the *viator* from despair, because, as natural hope, magnanimity anticipates a final and meaningful integration of all my experiences in a worthy narrative, even if I will not be its final narrator.

Again we come across the insight that the way we relate to the existential challenge that unavoidably comes with the reflexivity of experience depends on the kind of person we are. For this reflexivity is not primarily the key to understanding the dialectics of reason itself, as Hegel thought, or the key to the insight into our finitude and hence radical historicity, as Gadamer thought. Rather, this second order experience with experience is a moment of achieving the end of being human.

8. The experience with experience: discovering the gratuity of the experience given

As the first linguistic register teaches us, every experience arises from an antecedent "given," every experience is an encounter with reality. It does not have to be the way it is and it will not always be the way it presently is (and in both cases the kind of person I am has some influence on it), but the fact that it "is" is in no way the result of an antecedent achievement or merit of mine. This complex coincidence of gratuity and contingency is the condition for the possibility of ever new experiences, and only by being open to new experiences, in other words, by welcoming this gratuity and contingency of reality, are we able to have an experience (second linguistic register) in the first place.

Humility and magnanimity allow a person to receive and to respond to this "given" freely and generously, that is, by way of a free response of the whole person. Receiving a "given" actively by way of a free response, at once humble and magnanimous, is to acknowledge the gratuity of the "given." For humility prevents me from reducing the given to the merely given, to "one damn thing

after another," that is, from reducing the "given" to "non-sense." Humility rather facilitates the paying attention to the "given" as such and respects its gratuity by an attitude of reverence (which acknowledges that what is given to me antecedes my own doing and claims my own doing in specific ways). The perfection of this humility in the face of experience is the gratitude that flowers in the virtue of religion, the thanksgiving that is due for the gratuity of one's own existence as well as the gratuity of the whole world. Hence the proper expression of the reflexivity of experience that yields the truth of the *status viatoris* is nothing but the virtue of religion. The proper practice of the virtue of religion as thanksgiving realizes the given as gift. Magnanimity, as natural hope, embraces this gift and the tacit promise it entails: the fullness and the fulfillment of the kind of experience we cannot but seek as human beings, the knowledge of the first truth and the happiness of attaining the supreme good.

Every experience of the "given" of reality is thus inherently open to be received as gift, as sheer gratuity. But whether any experience indeed is received as such depends on the kind of person we are. Which sources feed and sustain the virtues of humility, magnanimity, and religion, which in turn sustain our *status viatoris*? What keeps us from remaining vulnerable to the danger of giving in to cynicism and despair?

Philosophy does not and indeed cannot give a conclusive answer to these questions. It rather brings forth these questions when it attends to the entailments of experience. For these entailments unavoidably lead to the question of the nature and end of the human being. Because the true answer to this question must include the end of the human being, the fulfillment of the desire to know the first truth and to attain the supreme good, proximate answers might be possible, but the full answer can only be had by a participation in the first truth and supreme good itself, in short, by the ultimate experience, the "*experientia novissima*," the newest of all experiences, that can never be disappointed by being supplanted with another experience. Receiving the answer is therefore identical with being elevated from the *status viatoris* into the *status comprehensoris*, the state of the blessed who enjoy the beatific vision.[31] Under the condition

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[31]Nota bene! We are not to understand *comprehensor* in the sense that the blessed comprehend God, exhausting God's intelligibility in one act of understanding. Through the light of glory, the blessed are in a complete union with God not only

of the *status viatoris* such an answer must necessarily have the character of a derivative participation in the *status comprehensoris*, a participation, though, that does not obliterate *the status viatoris*, but that occurs according to its fundamental structure of contingency, temporality, and finality.

9. The "experienced" saint: the perfection of experience in the inchoate participation of the divine life (Christian perfection)

Only a source categorically different from human wisdom can offer such an answer, an answer that can only be received by way of a gratuitous and inchoate participation of the human intellect in the highest truth, that is, by divine faith. By way of divine faith we come to understand that God sent his only begotten Son to take on our *status viatoris* by taking on human nature in order that Christ himself might be the way, the truth, and the life by way of whom we may reach the end that divine faith makes us desire most, the ultimate end attained in the *status comprehensoris*.[32] By incorporating us into himself, we already receive a share in his own divine life under the condition of the *status viatoris*, which entails our free cooperation and the possibility of turning away from this divine life. It is by way of the supernatural, infused virtues of faith, hope, and charity that we come to participate in the divine life. "The greatest of them all is charity" (1 Cor 13:13), because charity, when it perfectly informs all other virtues, makes the *viator* adhere to God *as already possessed*. Charity is nothing but the prelude to and most perfect anticipatory participation in the blessed life, in the *status comprehensoris*.[33] When we receive the gift of sanctifying grace, that

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of charity but also of understanding—they see God *totum*, that is as genuinely attaining to God, but not *totaliter*, not comprehensively and exhaustively (*ST* I, q. 12, a. 7).

[32]John G. Arintero, O.P., describes the whole of the Christian life, comprising the *status viatoris* as well as the *status comprehensoris*, in the briefest and most beautiful Johannine terms: "The Son of God came into the world to incorporate us into Himself and to make us live by Him as He Himself lives by the Father" (*The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*, vol. 1, trans. Jordan Aumann, O.P. [St. Louis/London: Herder, 1949], 1).

[33]The *viator*'s first pursuit engendered by the increase of charity is the detachment from sin, the *viator*'s second pursuit is the persistent struggle for the progress in

is, the principle of participation in the divine life, the theological virtues fortify and perfect humility and magnanimity by ordering them to the ultimate end of the *status viatoris*.

Now it appears to me that, should we ever be on the look-out for exemplifications of such inchoate participation in the divine life, we do well to attend to the lives of the saints. Faith, hope, and charity, as supernaturally infused dispositions, are the direct effect of sanctifying grace, that is, the principle of the divine life in the Christian. Saints are those who cooperate most intensely and heroically with this principle of the divine life and hence repeatedly merit an increase in charity.[34] And this is the reason why the saints remain always essentially young: they remain always open to making new experiences in an ever expanding horizon of divine charity, infused by sanctifying grace. Thus, the saints show us most fully what it means to be the kind of persons whose "experience with experience" teaches them to receive every new experience as a gift of God's loving providence, which in turn keeps them open in the most profound, intensive as well as extensive, way to the whole of reality, and that means first and foremost to the Giver of all reality. In that, the saints are exemplary *viatores*. For their "experience with experience" is shaped by a constant deepening of faith (the contemplation of the mystery of God's triune life of love), hope (the anticipatory embrace of the divine life in the life of unceasing prayer), and charity (the union with the love and hence life of God).

It becomes obvious now in which way we can never speak of a saint as "experienced" and in which way we indeed must speak of the saint as "experienced," indeed as the most experienced of all *viatores*. For what constitutes sainthood, the ever intensified embrace of and heroic cooperation with sanctifying grace, does not per se constitute any distinct practice or set of practices (though it clearly is sustained by contemplation and prayer). Consequently, the saint's experiences qua saint cannot be integrated into the framework of such a distinct practice or set of practices. Hence a univocal increase in the experience of sainthood (Christian perfection thus being identical with becoming experienced in sainthood) is per se impossi-

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good, and the *viator*'s third pursuit is "to aim chiefly at union with and enjoyment of God: this belongs to the perfect who *desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ*" (*ST* II-II, q. 24, a. 9).

[34] *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 8.

ble. In the case of the saint (who, it is important to recall, is in this nothing but simply the exemplar of every Christian), every experience is received as a gift of God and referred back to God in gratitude and thus integrated in a narrative the beginning and end of which is God and the center of which is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Because the end of this narrative is no longer the saint's own end, but her or his end in Christ, the saint will abandon any self-deceptive attempt at owning his or her experiences (second linguistic register). The typical modern version of such a form of self-deceptive ownership would be the "autobiography"—authorship as the achievement of one's self by oneself. Saints do not write autobiographies—and Augustine's *Confessions* is not an autobiography but precisely its doxological disowning and suspension.[35] The same is true for what some might erroneously consider as the "autobiographies" of St. Teresa of Avila and of St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

While the saint can never be "experienced" in sainthood, the saint is arguably the most experienced *viator* there is. Because the saint ever more heroically embraces the inchoate participation in the life of God which is charity (a participation given to every baptized Christian), the saint has a connatural awareness of the difference between the life of divine charity and the depth of misery and sin in which humanity is entangled. Hence the saint is the only person who, without falling into prideful pretension or into clever cynicism, can utter Terence's dictum, "Homo sum: nihil humanum mihi alienum est." "Nothing that is human is strange to me." If we want to inform ourselves with ever greater accuracy about "experience and its claim to universality" we do well by entering the school of the saints and we do even better by praying to God to make us saints, too. By thus radically opening ourselves to the surpassing, the

[35]"The thirteen books of my *Confessions* praise the just and good God in all my evil and good ways, and stir up towards him the mind and feelings of men. As far as I am concerned, they had this effect on me when I wrote them, and they still do when I read them. What others think is their own business: I know at least that many of the brethren have enjoyed them and still do" ("*Confessionum* mearum libri tredecim, et de malis et de bonis meis Deum laudant iustum et bonum, atque in eum excitant humanum intellectum et affectum. Interim quod ad me attinet, hoc in me egerunt cum scriberentur et agunt cum leguntur. Quid de illis alii sentiant, ipsi viderint; multis tamen fratribus eos multum placuisse et placere scio.") (Augustine, *Retractions*, II. 6, 1).

ultimate liminal experience, our experience will never be the same again. For the ultimate experience, even if only inchoately had by way of the theological virtue of charity, does not destroy but rather perfects our expectations, even the wildest. "Quoniam caritas ex Deo est; et omnis qui diligit, ex Deo natus est et cognoscit Deum" (1 Jn 4:7). □

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