

TRUTH AND THE
CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION:
THE REFORMATION OF
CAUSALITY AND THE
ICONOCLASM OF THE SPIRIT

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“The imagination is where the world
can have a sort of spiritual home in us,
and for that same reason is what allows us
to have a home in the world.”

I.

In an essay on the enduring significance of Dante, the poet Paul Claudel wrote of the age that had just passed: “The crisis that reached its peak in the nineteenth century . . . was the drama of a starved imagination.”¹ It may strike us as odd to show such concern over what would seem to be nothing more than a faculty of aesthetic creativity in relation to an age in which man was being radically redefined in abstraction from any supernatural destiny or transcendent horizon of meaning, when an anti-human industrialization

¹Paul Claudel, “Introduction à un poème sur Dante,” in *Positions et propositions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1928), 174–175. For an English translation, see “Religion and the Artist: Introduction to a Poem on Dante,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 357–367.

grew with the waning of an organic and cultural Christian faith, which left the West vulnerable to the two World Wars. But what is at stake in the imagination is in truth far more than a mere aesthetic faculty, conventionally understood. The imagination is, if not the center of the human being, then nevertheless that without which there can be no center, for it marks the point of convergence at which the soul and body meet; it is the place where faith in the incarnate God becomes itself incarnate and therefore truly becomes faith; it is—pace Hegel—where reason becomes concrete, and the bodily life of the senses rises to meet the spirit. It lies more deeply than the sphere of our discrete thoughts and choices because it is the ordered space within which we in fact think and choose. Far more than a mere faculty, the Christian imagination is a way of life, and this is because we might say it represents the point of intersection between Christianity and the world. In this case, a starved imagination represents a crisis indeed.

Now, it is no doubt the case that the almost maniacal multiplication of images in the technological explosion of the twentieth century has done nothing to nourish the imagination, but instead has fed it with unwholesome food. But it is not enough simply to issue a call for the re-invigoration of the imagination or for the Christianization of the media. We need instead to address the problem at its roots. I propose that one of the sources of the starved imagination lies in the general impoverishment of the notion of truth, through which all our human experience is mediated and thus formed. In the present context, it is of course not possible to lay out a satisfactory argument regarding the history of the notion of truth, so I will instead offer a philosophical reflection on one aspect of the issue, though it may initially seem tangential to the question of the health of the imagination. I intend to reflect on the transformation of the notion of causality in the seventeenth century and what this transformation implies for the significance of sense experience, which represents of course the foundation of the imagination. My thesis is that a mechanistic conception of the natural world evacuates sense experience of meaning, and therefore that the effort to cultivate the Christian imagination will be vain unless it is accompanied by a recovery of the ontological significance of goodness and beauty and thus by a critique of the popular view of the world inherited from classical physics. This is a task we might call a “re-imagining of the natural world.”

II.

Every fall and spring, in Introduction to Philosophy classes all over the world, René Descartes is presented to young, impressionable imaginations as a more systematically rigorous proponent of “Rationalism,” the philosophy that Plato supposedly brought into being. According to Rationalism, sense experience lacks the qualities required to furnish a reliable object for the mind: it is neither necessary nor universal, as rational objects must be. The inference generally drawn is that the senses are deceptive, and thus present at best indifferent stepping stones to reach the true life of reason, and at worst obstacles that actively seduce the mind away from such a life. If the Intro class includes a bit of intellectual history, one learns that the contempt for the body implied in Platonic Rationalism and taken over by Plotinus and his followers made Neoplatonism the philosophy most suited to the early Christian thinkers, who (as Nietzsche sneered²) added to Plato’s primarily epistemological motivation a more directly moral reason to reject the sense world.

There are indeed texts in abundance from Plato, Plotinus, and the Church Fathers that would seem to confirm this interpretation beyond any doubt, texts that cause contemporary Christian thinkers a good deal of embarrassment. A closer inspection of these texts, however, and a consideration of them in the light of the general view of the world they express, would reveal that the antipathy toward the senses in the ancient world is radically different from that in the modern world, and that only the former is compatible with a loving embrace of the sense world as marvelously filled with meaning. A genuine contempt for the senses requires their being emptied of any significance at all, and this, as we will see, follows from the changes in our understanding of nature that occur during what is known as the Scientific Revolution, of which Descartes was both a participant and an immediate heir. To see this,

²Speaking of the ancient philosophers, Nietzsche wrote, “Now they all believe, desperately even, in what has being. But since they never grasp it, they seek for reasons why it is kept from them. ‘There must be mere appearance, there must be some deception which prevents us from perceiving that which has being: where is the deceiver?’ ‘We have found him,’ they cry ecstatically; ‘it is the senses! These senses, which are so immoral in other ways too, deceive us concerning the *true* world’” (*Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Penguin Books, 1976], 480).

we will compare Plato's and Galileo's response to the question, What is the cause of our sense experience? The first aspect of this question that we must attend to here is the notion on which it turns: What, first of all, does it mean to be a *cause*?

The Greek word for cause (*αἰτία*) is a broad one, i.e., it does not initially have a univocal technical meaning. Used in a philosophical context, it indicates anything that accounts for a thing's being the way it is, that which is responsible for the how and why of a thing.³ In his late dialogue, the *Timaeus*, Plato begins his account of cause in the cosmos by making two fundamental distinctions. He first distinguishes between that which is and never becomes (being, τὸ ὄν) and that which becomes and never is (becoming, τὸ γιγνόμενον) (27d–28a). “Everything which becomes,” he goes on to say, “must of necessity become owing to some cause; for without a cause it is impossible for anything to attain becoming” (28a). Among those things that come to be by virtue of a cause, Plato next distinguishes between those that are beautiful and those that are not. The former are modeled after that which is, the latter after that which has come to be. If we ask, then, where among these distinctions we would place the cosmos as a whole in which we live, i.e., the world that is manifest to the senses, we would have to say that, “as visible and tangible and having body” (28b), it has come to be, and, as evidently beautiful and well-ordered, it has been modeled after what is eternal and perfect. To suggest otherwise, says Plato, is “impious”: “It is clear to everyone that [the maker's] gaze was on the eternal; for the cosmos is the fairest of all that has come into existence, and he the best of all the causes” (29a).

As straightforward as this passage may seem, it is filled with meaning that it would be good to unfold. As we see here, Plato affirms that causality always occurs according to a model, which is another way of saying that what comes to be is not simply a self-contained entity, but a revelation or manifestation of something else: to say that the causal agent always makes according to a model means that *agency is the communication of form*. Causation is not, in other words, simply the bringing about of a thing or the setting of something in motion, i.e., an essentially *formless* event or activity, which may or may not *subsequently* give rise to something with form

³See Joe Sachs, *Aristotle's Physics: A Guided Study* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 245.

and therefore something intelligible. If the cause is what accounts for a thing, it is form for Plato that is most fundamentally cause, most fundamentally responsible for the way things are. This simple insight is *magnificent*: it leads to a particular way of characterizing absolutely everything that exists: “Since these things are so,” Plato writes, “it follows by unquestionable necessity that this world is an image of something” (29b). To say that agency is the communication of form means that all of the things that come to be have the character of image—the Greek word is εἰκῶν, whence the English “icon”—or, in other words, that they reflect a meaning of which they are not themselves the source. It is crucial to see that there is no dualism here, as it were, between being and significance, as if things had a sort of opaque reality which subsequently indicated an intelligible content. To posit such a bifurcation would be to deny the meaning of cause as Plato clearly intends it, namely, as the communication of form in the bringing about of a thing. We could say that, for Plato, ontology *is* semiotics. Being an image is what makes a thing *real*.

But if form accounts for the *way* things are, it does not yet account for the fact that there is a sensible world in the first place. It is significant that Plato distinguishes in the *Timaeus* between what he calls the models (παραδείγματα), and the agency that “reproduces” them, as it were, in nature—the famous “demiurge,” or craftsman. To ask after the *ultimate* cause of the world is to ask why the agency makes it at all. Plato’s response to what Heidegger refers to as the most radical question for thinking, Why is there something rather than nothing? is again both simple and endlessly rich: “Let us state the reason why. He [the maker and father of the universe] was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so, being free from jealousy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible” (29e). Plato’s statement here accords with his well-known claim in the *Republic* that the Idea of the Good is the ultimate cause of all being.⁴ We have in this the first expression of what would become a basic axiom in Neoplatonism, and was embraced by the Fathers and the medieval theologians: it is the very nature of goodness to be self-diffusive.⁵ Indeed, it is just this character that requires us to see goodness as the ultimate cause: according to the ancient axiom, what is perfect cannot come from

⁴*Republic* VI, 509b.

⁵Cf. Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, IV.1; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I.5.4.

what is imperfect, but only the reverse, which means that the ultimate cause of everything cannot be imperfect in any respect. But what is perfection itself cannot act so as to become more perfect, which implies that its causation must be a consequence of the perfection it always already has rather than a means to accomplish that perfection.

Moreover, for the very same reason, what is brought about by goodness must necessarily reflect its cause, since perfect causality cannot be anything but the communication of its own perfection, i.e., its *self*, to another.⁶ In this respect the form that is communicated by agency is necessarily a reflection of goodness. And, finally, insofar as this form most basically determines what a thing is, and is itself an imitation of the first cause, the gift of the being of each thing is at the very same time the gift of the ultimate purpose of each: namely, to be what it is by imitating in its particular way the ultimate source of all that is, i.e., by pursuing goodness. In a word, what would eventually be differentiated by Aristotle into three causes, appears first in Plato in its unity: the *what* of things is inseparable from their goodness, their purpose, and indeed their “thereness.” For this very reason, goodness represents the paradigm of causality—the goodness at the origin of the cosmos, as we saw, is the “best of all the causes”—and thus all causes in the cosmos are, *as* causes, a reflection of goodness. Nothing is so causal, for Plato, as goodness and the beauty he takes to be essentially identical with it.⁷

⁶According to Eric Perl, an attentive reading of the *Timaeus* reveals that the forms by which the Demiurge makes the world are nothing but the Demiurge himself, that is, the content of his mind which is identical with himself. This, he shows, was the standard interpretation of Plato in antiquity: “The Demiurge and the Forms: A Return to the Ancient Interpretation of Plato’s *Timaeus*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 18 (1998): 81–92.

⁷A word should be introduced here in relation to the obvious objection that thinking of the maker of the universe as “the best of all the causes” is a textbook example of ontotheology. What Plato means by the best is the ideal or the form, which cannot itself be numbered among the things in which it is present (or it could not be present to them, but would simply be juxtaposed to them), but as present in each is transcendent of them all. Thus in this case it would be more proper to call the good the “causality of all cause”: on an interpretation along these lines, see John McGinley, “The Doctrine of the Good in the *Philebus*,” *Apeiron* 11 (1977): 27–57, esp. 34–35. As he explains, it is for Plato precisely goodness that makes a cause a cause.

What, then, does this view of causality imply for the status of sense experience? In the *Phaedo*, Socrates recounts his puzzlement at his encounter with the early philosophers who attempted to account for the way things are through what we would call “mechanistic causes,” namely, through the pushing and pulling of material bodies acting upon one another extrinsically. Although he does not deny the reality of such activity, he explains that the name “cause” “does not belong to it” (99b). In the *Timaieus*, he refers to what we would call mechanistic causes as *ξυναίτια*, that is, that which accompanies (*ξυν-*) the cause, though he adds that the majority of people confuse them with the causes themselves. In the context of the *Phaedo*, Socrates insists that there is a distinction between that which is a cause *in reality* (*τῷ ὄντι*), and that without which the real cause could not be a cause. The mechanical interaction of bodies is, of course, necessary for things to be the way they are, but it does not *account* for them, it is not what explains them or reveals *what* they are.⁸ What is lacking in the mechanistic explanation (or better: what prevents this account from *being* an explanation), as Socrates goes on to say, is the *goodness* that “holds [things] together” (99c), because goodness *is* in fact the causality of all cause. As Dionysius would affirm, many centuries later, every sort of cause whatsoever exists for the sake of, by means of, and in, the beautiful and the good.⁹

It is at this point that Socrates offers his counterproposal for the operation of cause: what makes things beautiful, for example, is not some physical thing such as color, shape, the arrangement of parts—though of course these may be necessary conditions of beauty—but it is *beauty itself* that causes it. It is, more specifically, the presence (*παρουσία*) or communion (*κοινωνία*) of beauty “itself” in things (100d) that makes them beautiful. The sensible reality of beauty, in other words, is *caused* by the intelligible form of beauty. Now, it is difficult for us to hear this claim without imagining a “thing” called Beauty, which *acts on* another thing, i.e., exerts a force on it, so as to bring about beauty in it. But this is precisely the sort of activity that, as Socrates has just affirmed, fails to warrant the

⁸In the *Timaieus*, Plato refers to the (mechanical) *necessity* that must be taken into account in one’s explanation of the cosmos, but, precisely as opposed to intelligence, is not a cause in the strict sense. See for example 46e and 47e–48a.

⁹See *The Divine Names*, IV.10.

name “cause,” because it in fact fails to account for things. How, then, are we to understand the kind of causality Socrates is offering in its place?

To say that the presence of Beauty is the cause of beautiful things *qua* beautiful is simply to say that the sensible beauty we perceive in things is the intelligible form of beauty manifest in space and time; in other words, it is to say that sense experience is the expression of a *meaning*, that it has intelligible content, which, *as* intelligible, cannot simply be identified with the particularity of its manifestation. If we recall the point made in the *Timaeus*, namely, that whatever comes to be is the result of the communication of form, we see that what Socrates says about beauty here ought to be extended to all things in the cosmos: physical objects, insofar as they are intelligible, are the expression of *meaning*, intelligible content, in a spatial and temporal mode. We can go further: there is, in fact, no content whatsoever in our sense experience that is not an expression of intelligible meaning. The word that this observation demands is the word we saw Plato use at the outset, a word that will forever be associated with Plato’s philosophy: εἰκῶν, image. The sensible world is image, through and through, which is to say the sensible world is an expression of meaning, i.e., a reflection of goodness. In the divided line image of Plato’s *Republic*,¹⁰ we see this point made with all desired clarity: here, Plato divides a line into unequal segments, the upper two representing different modes of intelligibility, the lower two representing different modes of sensible perception, but it is a continuous line from top to bottom, which is to say that the idea and the sensible reality are not two different things, but a single meaning grasped either intellectually or grasped with the bodily senses.¹¹ The upshot of all this is that there is nothing in what we would call the “physical” world that is not derived from form except its not being itself form, and this is simply a way of saying that the physical world is nothing but meaning made tangible.

What, then, accounts for Plato’s notorious depiction of philosophy as a liberator from the deceitful senses that imprison the soul in a body?

¹⁰*Republic* VI, 509d–511e.

¹¹See the classic article by Henry Jackson, “On Plato’s *Republic* VI 509d sqq.,” *The Journal of Philology* 10 (1882): 132–150.

The lovers of learning know that when philosophy gets hold of their soul, it is imprisoned in and clinging to the body, and that it is forced to examine other things through it as through a cage and not by itself, and that it wallows in every kind of ignorance. Philosophy sees that the worst feature of this imprisonment is that it is due to desires, so that the prisoner himself is contributing to his own incarceration most of all. As I say, the lovers of learning know that philosophy gets hold of their soul when it is in that state, then gently encourages it and tries to free it by showing them that investigation through the eyes is full of deceit, as is that through the ears and the other senses. Philosophy then persuades the soul to withdraw from the senses insofar as it is not compelled to use them and bids the soul to gather itself together by itself, to trust only itself and whatever reality, existing by itself, the soul by itself understands, and not to consider as true whatever it examines by other means, for this is different in different circumstances and is sensible and visible, whereas what the soul itself sees is intelligible and invisible. The soul of the true philosopher thinks that this deliverance must not be opposed and so keeps away from pleasures and desires and pains as far as he can . . . because every pleasure and every pain provides, as it were, another nail to rivet the soul to the body and to weld them together. It makes the soul corporeal, so that it believes that truth is what the body says it is. (*Phaedo* 82d–83d)¹²

For all the talk of the beautiful cosmos, is not Plato nevertheless a dualist in the end who relegates the material world to a ghostly unreality? Doesn't he make the imagination, εἰκασία, a trivial power of the soul that needs to be transcended to the purity of reason alone?¹³ The interpretation we have just laid out, which brings out the *significance* of sense experience and the supreme *beauty* of the physical world, is not only able to be harmonized with the passages expressing a kind of hostility toward the senses, but in fact *explains* them.

The passage from the *Phaedo*, which is one of the clearest “antibody” texts in the Platonic *corpus*, makes two points that are

¹²For contrasting interpretations, it is interesting to read Catherine Pickstock's “The Soul in Plato,” in *Explorations in Contemporary Continental Philosophy of Religion*, ed. D. Baker and P. Maxwell (New York: Radopi, 2003), 115–126, and James K. A. Smith's critique in *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 201–204. Smith's interpretation represents just what the present article intends to critique.

¹³See *Republic* VII, 532a–534b.

especially significant given our discussion thus far: first, he does not say that the body imprisons the soul, but rather that the soul imprisons *herself* in the body (82e), which is what constitutes the worst feature of this predicament. Second, what characterizes this imprisonment is the inversion by which the corporeal aspect of experience is taken to be more real than the non-corporeal dimension. To put this point in the language we have been using, it amounts to saying that the expression is given priority over what is expressed. But this inversion would in fact by that very stroke eliminate the body's and thus the senses' expressive character. In other words, to take the natural world *in* its materiality as a positive thing in itself separate from its subordination to meaning and thus its expressiveness is to destroy it as image, to render it mute. It thus becomes dead "stuff." The world surrenders its meaning, and the soul becomes entangled in the push and pull of pleasure and pain as so many mechanistic and therefore unintelligible, non-causal, forces. Indeed, if the body is no longer "expression," then the soul is no longer that which expresses itself. It thus becomes itself a "thing," alongside the thing called "body," and of course it will necessarily be an impotent sort of thing, for what kind of corporeal force can *the soul* exert in comparison to bodies? It is because of this unintelligibility that Plato describes this inversion as a state of ignorance—to fail to see the world as significant already in its being is to be ignorant in the perfect sense—and it also makes clear why this is not something the body can *qua* body impose on the soul: to think that it can is already to assume that the body is a thing in itself over against the soul, which is to say, it is to take the state of ignorance to be the best vantage from which to see the truth of things. To a soul that sees because it knows, by contrast, the world is nothing but epiphany.

The irony now ought to be clear: Owing to the paradoxical nature of image, the inversion of the body-soul relationship is deeply problematic, not (only) because it trivializes the soul, but because it subsequently trivializes the body. In other words, the absolutizing of the physical fails to accord the physical its due goodness—i.e., it empties it of the goodness it can possess only as receiving, and thus only in its subordinate station as mediator, as image. But this means that the sometimes vehement condemnations of the body's tendency to claim ascendancy over the soul that we find in classical literature, both pagan and Christian, may indeed be a zealous affirmation and protection of the body's *significance*. The decisive question is whether

the body and soul, and thus the senses and the intellect, are taken to be opaque things juxtaposed to one another, or whether body is presented as *image*, and thus as an *expression* of spirit. One cannot insist on the body's significance without at the same time insisting on a hierarchical relationship to spirit. As we have seen, behind this question lies the even more fundamental question of whether causality is understood first and foremost in terms of goodness and beauty. As Hans Urs von Balthasar has taught us, one of the most important considerations when evaluating an intellectual epoch is the status it grants to beauty. Here we find a way in which Christianity deepens, and gives an ultimate foundation for, one of the highest truths in pagan thought. The beauty that Augustine loved late was a beauty that ran through the cosmos, a beauty that called him *in sensible things to God*.¹⁴ We recall that it was precisely Augustine's encounter with Neoplatonic thought—most likely Plotinus and Porphyry in Victorinus's translation—that liberated him from the flesh-condemning Manichees.¹⁵ It is not at all accidental that the liberation consisted in the discovery that spirit must be understood in non-material terms, and thus not as a thing opposed to the thing called body. Only thus can the body, and therefore the material world, be *expressive* in the way Augustine celebrates in the *Confessions*. Plotinus himself, who may be notorious for passages that seem to demean the body, wrote what is one of the most passionate attacks on Gnosticism in the ancient world.¹⁶ Anyone who hates the body, he writes, blasphemes because he shows contempt for its Creator.¹⁷ It is, indeed, goodness and beauty that lie directly in the center of what we may for that very reason call Plotinus's "cosmos." But the Christian thinker who adopts and adapts this view most decisively is no doubt Dionysius the Areopagite, for whom God is *cause*, i.e., creator, precisely *as* goodness and beauty,¹⁸ and thus whose relentless *via negativa* takes place from beginning to end within a world whose very stones proclaim the Lord precisely

¹⁴Augustine, *Confessions*, X.xxvii (38). Augustine refers here to each of the five senses in recounting God's calling to him through the created world.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, book VII.

¹⁶Plotinus, *Ennead* II.9.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, II.9.16.

¹⁸Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, IV.7.

in their stoneness.¹⁹ Along with Augustine, Dionysius was passed on to the great thinkers of the Middle Ages as the authority on such matters, and these thinkers can therefore be said to be arguably the most decisive formers of the Christian imagination.²⁰

III.

The light of our discussion so far will set into relief the differences between Cartesian rationalism and the so-called rationalism or spiritualism of the Greek and Christian Neoplatonists. In the first place, Descartes explicitly distinguishes between body and spirit as between two *things*: the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*.²¹ In this, he is much closer to the Manichees, or in any event to the materialist philosophers of late antiquity, than to the Platonic or the Augustinian tradition.²² One might object that Descartes is using the term “res” here in a wholly equivocal sense, since the mind is clearly for him in no way a “thing” like matter extended in space, which is precisely why it becomes so difficult for him to explain how they would interact in a living human being. Though it would not be difficult to show how this objection is mistaken, it is in any event beside the point. The crucial thing is this: the body for Descartes is no longer *image*, which is to say that it is no longer expressive of a meaning which, as meaning, cannot be body in any sense.

Descartes’ relationship to the world of the senses is therefore quite radically different from what we saw in Plato. For Plato, truth

¹⁹On a “theologically aesthetic” reading of Dionysius that interprets the negative moment within the positivity of manifestation, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 2: *Studies in Theological Styles: Clerical Styles* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 178–184.

²⁰On the ultimate significance of the corporeal in a Christian vision of the world, see Nicholas J. Healy, *The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: Being as Communion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For a study of Aquinas’s treatment of the body along the same lines, see Graham McAleer, *Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics: A Catholic and Nontotalitarian Theory of the Body* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

²¹Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, I.8; II.4. Cf. also, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, II and VI.

²²See the excellent argument in this regard in Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), chapter five, 134–177.

is *present* (παρουσία) in sense experience, if not *qua* sense experience, so that transcending the senses means seeing them as images, i.e., “windows” of meaning. Body is *meaning-ful*, we recall, precisely by not being meaning itself. For Descartes, by contrast, everything qualitative (i.e., expressive of meaning) in sense experience must simply be set aside as *subjective*, for reasons we will investigate in just a moment. What is left is nondescript “stuff,” bereft of any nature and reduced to its measurable dimensionality, perceivable by the mind alone.²³ It is noteworthy, in relation to our general theme, that this stripping of sensible objects precisely of their sensibilia coincides with the elimination of the imagination as an essential part of the soul.²⁴ We suggested at the outset that the imagination operates as a sort of middle term connecting the body and the soul and for that very reason connecting man and the world. Lacking an imagination, Descartes reduces the real to a pure mathematical abstraction, which neither he nor anyone else will ever encounter. Arguably, Descartes finally resolves the haunting problem of knowing whether the world exists in the *Meditations* simply by eliminating the world.

Now, these observations regarding Descartes echo criticisms that have been made of his philosophy for centuries. But I wish to suggest that this destruction of the imagination in Descartes is not the introduction of the problem, but rather itself an expression of a deeper transformation that was to have a far more pervasive impact on Western civilization than even Cartesian dualism, and that is the Scientific Revolution. Descartes’ “reformation” of philosophy, through the introduction of a method that would allow indifferently anyone to make progress in the understanding that was previously reserved for the few,²⁵ is itself a repetition of Galileo’s reformation of physics through the introduction of a technique that allows experiment to take the place of insight:

²³Descartes, *Meditations*, II, 31.

²⁴“Moreover, I find in myself faculties for certain special modes of thinking, namely the faculties of imaging and sensing. I can clearly understand myself *in my entirety* without these faculties” (ibid., VI, emphasis added).

²⁵See, for example, Part One of Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*, which begins: “Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world” In Descartes, intelligence becomes homogenized in the same way that motion becomes homogenized in Galileo.

Profound considerations of this sort belong to a higher science than ours. We must be satisfied to belong to that class of less worthy workmen who procure from the quarry the marble out of which, later, the gifted sculptor produces those masterpieces which lay hidden in this rough and shapeless exterior.²⁶

Our thesis has been that an appreciation of the meaningfulness of the senses rests on the primacy of goodness and beauty in the order of causality and therefore of understanding. It is no doubt true that the roots of this loss of primacy lie quite deep—one might point to goodness's loss of explanatory power in the new political philosophy of Machiavelli,²⁷ to the ascendancy of power over goodness in the nominalist theology of divine attributes, or even to the medieval appropriation of an Aristotelianism that separated goodness and truth because it had little place for beauty²⁸—but, however that may be, Galileo's work gives the reformation of causality decisive and culture-changing expression.

The heart of the matter lies in Galileo's reinterpretation of causality in strictly dynamic terms. According to Galileo, "that and no other is in the proper sense to be called cause, at whose presence the effect always follows, and at whose removal the effect disappears."²⁹ The difference between cause as defined here and in the classical view is striking. Cause for Galileo is not what *accounts* for an effect, but what *produces* an effect, and indeed does so wholly through direct, material contact. Moreover, the only relationship that holds in an essential way between cause and effect is *temporal succession*. It would require another generation or so before it was discovered, by David Hume, that such a relationship is not in fact intelligible in the strict sense. But Galileo already himself recognizes

²⁶Quoted in Edwin Arthur Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science: A Historical and Critical Essay* (London: Routledge, 1932), 94–95.

²⁷Pierre Manent gives a brilliant account of the shift in the "causal" status of goodness that occurs in Machiavelli in *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 10–19. For Machiavelli's rejection of the significance of the imagination, see *The Prince*, chapter 15.

²⁸See Balthasar's discussion of the subtle beginnings of the separation of the true and the good in his "Theology and Sanctity," *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1: *The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 181–186.

²⁹Quoted in Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*, 92.

that this view of causality—which to be sure unlocks the door to a new character of the material world, namely, one that, in its predictability, allows a kind of mastery never before possible—comes at the price of renouncing insight *into* the essence of things. As he says, for example, while we might inquire into the “essence” of the thing, it is

not as if we really understood any more, what principle or virtue that is, which moveth a stone downwards, than we know who moveth it upwards, when it is separated from the projicient, or who moveth the moon round, except only the name, which more particularly and properly we have assigned to all motion of descent, namely gravity.³⁰

An “effect” is not an image; it does not *reveal* the *nature* of its cause. To *produce* the effect, the cause must be of the same order as the effect, and thus has to be equally material. Cause and effect fall on the same horizontal line, which means, as we saw, that there can be no manifestation of meaning: revelation necessarily implies a hierarchy, insofar as what reveals must be in some fundamental sense subordinate to what it reveals. Investigating effects, therefore, does not *teach* us anything about the causes, no matter how precise and thorough our knowledge of the effects may be. Thus, as Galileo explains, the word “gravity” is a mere name. We do not know *what* it is. We are left, instead, with the task of calculating the quantity of the motion it produces through controlled observation of its effects.

For Plato, goodness is the paradigm of causality because it represents self-communication, and, since all other causality reflects to some degree this ultimate causality, what principally characterizes cause, as we saw, is the communication of form. For Galileo, by contrast, we might want to say that *force* is communicated from cause to effect, as revealed in the motion produced in the effect. But in the strictest terms, we would have to deny that *anything* is communicated. Communication implies that something is shared, that there is something that therefore unifies the communicants. According to the mechanistic view of causality we find in Galileo, however, nothing is “shared”: the only thing joining cause and effect, as we saw, is succession in time and space. Physical motion (mechanistically understood) by its nature is not something that can be shared; it is atomistic of its essence. One thing can set another in motion,

³⁰Ibid., 93.

but the connection between them is extrinsic; it is the nature of force to operate from the outside—as opposed to, say, attraction, which operates simultaneously externally and internally. We do not have room to pursue the theme here, but we note how the *quantification* of the study of motion results naturally from this transformation of the notion of cause. In this respect, Heidegger is profoundly right: the advent of empirical science is a result of a more fundamental shift in understanding; praxis is always and without exception rooted in and expressive of theory.³¹ Whereas, for Aristotle, motion is the actualization of a potential, and in this respect represents the unfolding of a nature, so that we have to describe it in the first instance as relative to that nature and thus in qualitative terms—e.g., Aristotle demonstrates why circular motion is the most perfect and thus expected of the highest things—motion can have no intrinsic significance for Galileo: it is the homogenous monotony best described by number, successive units of the same.³²

It is at this point that we can assess the implications of the reformation of causality for the significance of sense experience. In the popular scientific imagination, Galileo stands with Francis Bacon as the one who rescued science from the groundless and sterile fancies of late scholastic Aristotelianism by bringing it “down to earth,” and chastening it to remain more modestly within the bounds of the empirical. Though this judgment is in a certain respect true, the respect in which it is true rests on the radical reversal of the meaning of terms, so that the empirical loses any meaningful connection with sense experience. It is not simply that Galileo’s insistence on the empirical did not prevent him from wild and presumptuous speculation about things he could never in fact determine through sense experience³³—a fact that suggests that what

³¹See Heidegger’s “Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics” (which is an excerpt from his lecture *Die Frage nach dem Ding*), in *Basic Works*, trans. David Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 247–282.

³²*Ibid.*, 261. Simon Oliver contrasts the hierarchy of motion in Aristotle (and Aquinas) to the homogenization of motion in Newton, in relation to the theological presuppositions underlying this shift in understanding: *Philosophy, God and Motion* (London: Routledge, 2005).

³³In addition to his rather fanciful conjectures concerning sunspots, it is known, for example, that the instruments available in Galileo’s day for time measurement were not precise enough to justify his general inferences regarding the nature of motion. His theories, therefore, possessed an *a priori* character, to which he

“empirical” means in the first and most fundamental sense is a cast of mind, a philosophical disposition, before it designates a real practice—but in point of fact this empirical method requires one to do violence to sense experience in a systematic fashion. In his book, *The Two Great Systems*, Galileo expresses a boundless admiration for reason’s capacity, “in Aristarchus and Copernicus, to commit such a rape on their senses, as in despite thereof to make herself mistress of their credulity.”³⁴ Notice: the very image is wholly unnatural. But it offers a revealing point of contrast with what we saw earlier. The violation of the senses that this passage commends is foreign to the Platonic tradition, which would never imagine reason and the senses as two “things” set over against one another: for Plato, if anything, reason must exert a sort of restraint on itself, because the deception of the senses always turns out in the end to be reason’s self-deception. But in Galileo, reason and sense experience are *necessarily* opposed in their nature even if they are brought into accord in practice.

The reason for this opposition follows straightforwardly from the transformation of the understanding of cause. Sense experience is an *effect* produced in us by some external cause. But effects are not images that disclose the truth of their cause. Rather, they are individual motions that bear no relation to their causes apart from the fact of having been initiated by them. Thus, after discussing the way the sensation of tickling comes about in us through the touch of a feather, Galileo concludes:

Now this tickling is all in us, and not in the feather, and if the animate and sensitive body be removed, it is nothing more than a mere name. Of precisely a similar and not greater existence do I believe these various qualities to be possessed, which are attributed to natural bodies, such as tastes, odours, colours, and others.³⁵

Galileo’s inference applies to *all* of what are now called the secondary qualities of sense experience: it is all a subjective illusion, because it communicates nothing intelligible regarding the real. There is

accommodated the discrepancies in his experimental data.

³⁴Quoted in Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*, 69.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 75–76.

nothing in our experience of heat, for example, that reveals the nature of the objective reality of heat. What is real are bodies in motion, which lie as it were behind, but not in, our sense experience. The world of perceived qualities that fills our conscious life, and indeed our imagination, has nothing meaningful to *say* to us. It has to be mute, because—to speak somewhat anachronistically but no less accurately—it is in itself nothing but the separate motions of particles, the interplay of forces, in the material substance of the brain. Our only relationship to the world, in this case, is contiguity in time and space. There is clearly only a small step—if there is any step at all—between Galileo’s mechanism and Descartes’ mind-body dualism, which turns out to be an invincible monism of rationalistic intelligence.

We observed, earlier, the irony that the passionate language used in the ancient texts to “condemn” the flesh may represent in fact nothing less than a safeguard for its significance. The converse irony can be observed here: we often hear that modernity, with its “this-worldly” religion, is the first epoch in the history of the West to come to terms with the body and make peace with the flesh. But our discussion here suggests that what looks superficially like peace and a respect for the world of the senses arises in fact from a contempt that runs so deep it has grown cold to the point of indifference. The life of the senses can be enjoyed in detachment, or, conversely, the senses can be dispassionately exploited—“raped”—ultimately because sense experience does not mean anything in itself. In this case, imagination becomes simply trivial, and so too does the natural world the imagination mediates. The imagination is where the world can have a sort of spiritual home in us, and for that same reason is what allows us to have a home in the world. The destruction of the imagination—let us call it the iconoclasm of the spirit³⁶—will thus necessarily coincide with an alienation and its attendant anxiety, which drives man to the apparently more certain but literally hope-less scheme of self-redemption through productivity.³⁷ A more detailed investigation would be necessary to develop

³⁶The term was inspired by Frances Yates, who refers to the “inner iconoclasm” effected by Peter Ramus’s reform of logic and education: see *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 231–242. Yates notes that the Ramist reforms were most successful “in Protestant countries like England,” 234.

³⁷On the connection between the loss of a sacramental sense of the world and the growth of an anxious “work ethic,” see Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958).

and justify the observation, but it is worth reflecting on the fact that the reformation of science in Galileo and the reformation of philosophy in Descartes—not to mention the reformation of political philosophy previously in Machiavelli or the subsequent reformation of logic and education in Peter Ramus,³⁸ and arguably even the ecclesial reformation in Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli—all seem to share different versions of the same characteristics: they deny the substantial causal significance of goodness and beauty, i.e., the metaphysical reality of the transcendentals; they excise the whole of the mediating tradition which they subsequently affirm piecemeal on the basis of a new criterion applied immediately by the individual; they develop a technique or method that is meant to produce practical results rather than engender insight and understanding . . . and they all eliminate the significance of the imagination.

In sum, the root of what Claudel called the crisis of the late modern world, namely, the starvation of the imagination, is the eclipse of goodness and beauty from the order of cause. If this is true, it follows that the recovery of Christian art, Christian literature, and indeed Christian culture more generally, is not sufficient on its own to address this crisis. Or perhaps more adequately the recovery of a genuine Christian culture—the world and Christian imagination—requires a recovery of beauty in its theological, metaphysical, and ultimately even its physical significance. Anything less will no doubt unwittingly trivialize precisely what it seeks to restore. It is not just the Word, but the Word made flesh, who was sent by the Father to dwell among us, the Word made flesh who enjoined us to carry the Good News to the ends of the earth—i.e., to the very extremities of being. It is Christ who said, “Behold, I make all things new,” and who thus revealed himself to be, as the scholastics put it, the “perfect image,” of the Father, or as we might say, the Truth of the Father’s Imagination. □

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³⁸See Catherine Pickstock’s discussion of Ramus in *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 49–57.