

# “FAITH IS OBVIOUS”: THE APOLOGETICS OF CREATION

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“One could say that the child—both in his action,  
and his reception by the world—is the continual  
reminder and symbol that creation is a gift.”



I am so resplendent in my creation,  
In the sun and the moon and the stars  
In all of my creatures. . . .  
And especially in children. . . .  
And the gaze of children is purer than the blue of the sky,  
than the milky sky, and than a star’s rays in the peaceful night.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The stars proclaim, “Here we are!” and shine with gladness for God who made them.<sup>2</sup> The voice of day and night “goes out through all the earth,” pouring forth knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Dante tells us

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1. Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 3–4.

2. Bar 3:34.

3. Dan 3:59; Ps 19:1–4.

that “the heavens call to you and circle about you, displaying to you their eternal splendors.”<sup>4</sup> In the Psalms and in the Canticle of the Book of Daniel chanted in Morning Prayer, the life of nature—sun and moon, birds and beasts, lighting and clouds, fire and frost, mountains and hills, the entire cosmic order—joins in the litany of praise and awe and surpassing splendor. We are surrounded by and immersed in a world of miracles and wonders, of breath-taking and breath-giving beauty and delights, of “the torrent of Thy pleasure.”<sup>5</sup>

Any parent knows that young children express an enchanted joy and astonishment when they encounter something in nature they have never seen before—a translucent jellyfish, the shimmering iridescence of an insect’s wing or a peacock’s feather, a new-born lamb—even a slug! The philosophical rule that “being is only encountered in beings” is a child’s quotidian, concrete experience, opening to infinite horizons of discovery; children are astonished at being itself, life itself, and not at conceptual abstractions. Nor do they feel themselves to be abstracted subjects confronting alien objects: to watch, for example, a child and a puppy playing together is to witness something real, true, beautiful, and good that seems to be mutually unfolding and enfolding. Children don’t imagine themselves as “consciousnesses” constructing what they experience; they are receivers of gifts from an inexhaustible trove of treasures: a lobsterman pulls up his trap and a little boy waits with bated breath to see the surprises it contains. Little children live in the perpetual surprise of Christmas morning; their stance before reality is one of open receptivity and trust.

It is a truth known to the poetic and prosaic alike that after childhood things are quite different. One ages, one is busy about many concerns, one must put away childish things, and more than anything else, temptation and sin cloud the horizon. Joy, wonder, and astonishment in all their immediacy fade, and our deeply intimate relationship with everything around us breaks apart. This rupture from a reality that does not depend on us but is given to us from nature, not merely in the modern

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4. Dante, *Purgatorio* XIV.

5. Ps 36:8 (35:9 Vulgate, Douay-Rheims translation).

ecological sense but in the classical sense, as that which is given to each being at its birth (*natura*) and thus is only understood “in relationship to an end (*telos*) that was already in some way present in the original meaning of each being,”<sup>6</sup> manifests itself in separation and alienation from God, from the image and likeness of God written into our own being, from community with other persons, and from harmony with creation.

“Faith is obvious,” writes Péguy. “Faith can walk on its own. To believe you just have to let yourself go, you just need to look around.”<sup>7</sup> He echoes St. Paul: people are “without excuse,” for ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and deity “has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.”<sup>8</sup> Faith should be obvious: Why does that not seem to always be the case, given the splendor of creation? Edith Stein—St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross—says of the prophets that they hear God’s voice in nature, but it is not the case that natural revelation is accessible only to these chosen people. “The whole point of their mission rather assumes that others, too, can find God along this path. . . . Their only task is to bring people who hear their words to the point where they learn to see through nature.”<sup>9</sup> To “see through” is to see both the gift and the presence of the Giver in the gift. “Creation” has a double meaning, referring both to the continuous act of the Creator himself, and to the created order; these are clearly distinct, but just as clearly intrinsically related, and should be mutually illuminating.

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6. Alfredo Garcia Quesada, “Nature, Culture, and the Theology of Reconciliation” (unpublished paper, 2013).

7. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 9.

8. Rom 1:20.

9. Edith Stein, *Knowledge and Faith* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000), 100. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 151: “Visible form not only ‘points’ to an invisible, unfathomable mystery; form is the apparition of the mystery, and reveals it.” It is easy to see how without a deeper understanding of creation, without the analogical imagination, “seeing through nature” could appear dualistic. Environmental ethicist Eugene C. Hargrove says that “a medieval Christian, when confronted with natural objects . . . automatically tried to find Christian religious significance in them by associating them with parables and key remarks in the Bible,” whereas modern people, when shown a picture of a fish or a bird, “thought about real fish and birds” (*Foundations of Environmental Ethics* [New York: Prentice-Hall, 1989], 34).

This is the task of a true apologetics of creation: to bring us to the point where faith is obvious. Apologetics is more than simply responding to each thrust of rationalistic arguments; though necessary, if done in abstraction it is as effective as cutting off one of the Hydra's heads—Christianity is not merely a clarification of terms or the untangling of some logical impasse. Christianity is rather a new light in which everything is recast. What is needed for a return to the joy of childhood, though in a new and more profound register, is a re-engagement with the whole of life—how we live, all of what we are as persons in community, our imagination, a full and embodied catholic reason in harmony with faith. It is often said that apologetics involves not only argument but invitation, for outside of the practices of the community—the Eucharist, the prayers, the acts of charity—Christian rationality is sterile. Sometimes the best conclusion to a syllogism is an action: “The Logos, the reason for hope,” says Benedict XVI, “must become *apo-logía*; it must become a response.”<sup>10</sup> We are to take our part in carrying out our role as “co-operator with God in the work of Creation.”<sup>11</sup> To witness to the faith is not so much to proselytize as to draw people into participating in the life of Christ and his body, the Church, and thence into a giving-out, into her mission of the reconciliation of ruptures:

In intimate connection with Christ's mission, one can therefore sum up the Church's mission, rich and complex as it is, as being her central task of reconciling people: with God, with themselves, with neighbor, with the whole of creation.<sup>12</sup>

One of the problems in turning attention to creation is that too many see it as only of secondary importance, as if, against everything Scripture and our own experience tell us,

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10. Benedict XVI commenting on the First Letter of Peter, Meeting with Representatives from the World of Culture (Paris, 12 September 2008).

11. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, 37. And see Benedict XVI, Meeting with Representatives from the World of Culture: “God himself is the Creator of the world, and creation is not yet finished. God works, *ergázetai!* Thus human work was now seen as a special form of human resemblance to God, as a way in which man can and may share in God's activity as creator of the world.”

12. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 8.

God’s entire non-human creation were nothing more than an inert and disposable backdrop.<sup>13</sup> Heidegger speaks of the “forgetfulness of being” and Robert Spaemann of the “forgetfulness of persons”; “forgetfulness of creation” is the third sister, inextricably intertwined with the others. Benedict says that “to omit the creation would be to misunderstand the very history of God with men, to diminish it, to lose sight of its true order of greatness.”<sup>14</sup> The first article of the Credo affirms our belief in God the Creator; understanding our origin incorrectly leads only to incorrect understanding of everything else. The first error is that if God is not a true creator *ex nihilo*, if his “being” is not analogous but identical to that of creatures, then he becomes nothing more than the most supreme being and another “mechanical” cause, himself bound by something that exceeds him. Next, secular arguments against creation dismiss a God they paint as a distant, monolithic entity, but never consider the God-with-us of the Incarnation, nor the relationality of the Trinity. If divinity and humanity meet in the person of Christ, then in that radiant Form all the various metaphysical fractures—between God and the world, time and eternity, history and ontology, soul and body, obedience and freedom—are healed, and the limits, imperfections, and finitude of humanity and of all created being are not tragedies but signs of goodness and grace. If in the Trinity there is both difference and unity within the very heart of the Godhead, then both the human longing for unity with creation and with others and the simultaneous recognition of our differences are reconciled.

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13. Frank Sheed said, “It is no compliment to God’s omnipotence to treat what he has made of nothing as if it were little better than nothing. It is no compliment to a poet to be always seeking him and resolutely refusing to read his poetry. God is communicating with us, telling us something, by way of his universe. There is something verging on the monstrous about knowing God and not being interested in the things he has made, the things in which his infinite power is energizing. The logical development of so strange an attitude would be to love God so exclusively that we could not love men—an exclusiveness which he has forbidden” (*Theology and Sanity* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993], 366).

14. Benedict XVI, Homily at the Easter Vigil (23 April 2011). “Our profession of faith begins with the words: ‘We believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.’ If we omit the beginning of the Credo, the whole history of salvation becomes too limited and too small.”

Errors about God are followed by errors about creatures.<sup>15</sup> Within the technocratic mindset, not only the things of nature but persons as well become mechanisms,<sup>16</sup> while in ecological philosophies of identity, the boundaries between persons and created things dissolve, and both become nothing more than projections of “abstract interpretive schemata . . . upon the incessant play of phenomena.”<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, errors about creation lead to divisions within the community of believers; the current and recent popes repeatedly remind us of the need for “human ecology” and the deep and intimate connection between integral human development (in terms of life, family, and culture) and the created order, yet many behave as if these were mutually exclusive.<sup>18</sup> They reduce creation to “the environment” and reach a détente with secular ecologists. As a result, we lose what is distinctively Catholic: we may not see ourselves as thieves, extracting natural resources in a frenzy of Baconian power and utility, but we do not seem able to conceive of ourselves as anything more than good stewards of the earth—that is, hired managers, who, as everyone knows, care less for what they guard than do the owners. We lose the far deeper ontological relationality of *children* of our Father and thus *heirs* to his kingdom.<sup>19</sup> This means that a Catholic apologetics of creation must address not only unbelievers, but believers as well.

The fissure with reality experienced by the maturing individual person has been widening intellectually and culturally as well, first in a mechanistic-reductionist approach and then in

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15. Conversely, “errors about creatures sometimes lead one astray from the truth of faith, so far as the errors are inconsistent with true knowledge of God” (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3 [1]).

16. See, for example, Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

17. Michael Zimmerman on Arne Naess: *Contesting Earth’s Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley: U.C.L.A. Press, 1994), 124.

18. In speaking on human ecology, Benedict XVI says that “the book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development” (*Caritas in veritate*, 51).

19. Rom 8:16–17. I would like to thank André Houssney for suggesting the comparison.

various self-referential manifestations, eventually culminating in skepticism, relativism, and nihilism. After the turn to the subject, the Kantian turn, and the turn to language, the turn to the created order understood as “ecology” or “the environment”<sup>20</sup> appears to open a door to nature as a place of true contact with concrete reality in all its wondrous particularity. It is, as Benedict says, “a cry for fresh air,” though it “has not exactly flung open the windows.”<sup>21</sup> In the next section, we will consider four different ecological philosophies. In all these cases, creation as “act” is denied, and though creation as “created order” appears to be affirmed, there is little consistency about which lives are worth protecting along with a chilling flirtation with the concept of “life unworthy of life.” We lose persons in exchange for the environment—an unnecessary exchange if creation is seen in its totality: a whole that includes the realities of environment, persons, and wonder. The loss of the child is the most acute version of our loss of persons. Given that children have such an affinity for creation and live in a dimension of original unity, it would seem that the child holds a key to any true communion with creation, yet

Everywhere outside Christianity the child is automatically sacrificed. . . . The Child-Word in his quiet powerlessness can be so easily and by a thousand means rejected and got rid of, almost without believers noticing it (in the same way that human society is built on the tacit, thousandfold murder of the unborn, as if there were no need to waste words over that).<sup>22</sup>

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20. A series of “turns” progressively moved philosophy away from the realist metaphysics and participatory epistemology of the ancient and medieval world. Descartes turned to the subject, splitting it off from and opposing it to the object, as the primary focus of philosophy. Kant’s “Copernican Turn” abandoned metaphysics (what he saw as the study of the unknowable thing-in-itself) for appearance and the structures of the mind. The early twentieth-century positivists thought that though we cannot say anything about the way the world really is, at least we can say something about what we *say* there really is. The postmoderns discovered that language is a far more elusive and slippery thing than previously imagined. With each of these turns, there was a corresponding skepticism about the possibility of knowledge and truth. Some philosophers hoped that the shift to ecological philosophy would provide a return to some of what had been lost, and an end to the slide into nihilism.

21. Benedict XVI, Address to the German Parliament (22 September 2011).

22. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Man in History: A Theological Study* (London:

We end up with a world in which “Thank You for Not Breeding” signs punctuate ecological events, and the proclamation on a California billboard (“What Have Future Generations Ever Done For Us?”) replaces a welcoming, generative hope. Not only is the child, in all his wonderment and awe, the proper human response to creation, but how we as a culture treat the child is indicative of our stance toward creation as a whole. One could say that the child—both in his action, and his reception by the world—is the continual reminder and symbol that creation is a gift.

An apologetics of creation, like all apologetics, must begin and end with the Incarnation. All things are created through Christ, the Logos, whose “identity is inseparable from his being a child”;<sup>23</sup> after the ecological theories, we turn to Edith Stein’s incarnational “catholicity of reason,” and in the last section we return to Christ, the quintessential child. Only in Christ is the mystery of man made clear, and “only the Christian view of the mystery of childhood can offer a counterweight today to the heedlessness of the belief in progress, whether it appears in anti-Christian, or neutral, or even Christian guise.”<sup>24</sup>

#### ECOLOGICAL THEORIES

Giving a specifically intellectual defense of the faith seems harder than ever. Christianity’s opponents operate under assumptions that simultaneously refuse to acknowledge any alternative viewpoints and provide ultimately empty answers. On the other side, many Christians, deceived into thinking that everyone is working within the same conceptual framework, accept the stripped-down presuppositions of the technocratic definitions, ontology, and anthropology of their opponents, with predictable results. Among the usual suspects: 1) granting to science the realm of efficient/material causes while claiming for religion the formal and final causes, thus mischaracterizing the complementary integration of causes; 2) maintaining that science deals with fact,

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Sheed and Ward, 1968), 257, 251.

23. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 11.

24. Balthasar, *Man in History*, 257–58.



reason, and logic, while faith concerns values and emotions, thus capitulating to an irrational fideism that denies that both science and faith apprehend being, reality, and truth, though they ask different questions; 3) suggesting that only a “God of the gaps” can explain irreducible complexities and discontinuities, or the immense probabilities that had to coincide for there to be life at all, thus reducing God to a hypothesis that would no longer be needed as soon as science came up with an explanation; 4) arguing for a “creationism” in which creation becomes another mechanism competing with evolution;<sup>25</sup> or 5) making a case for “Intelligent Design” theory: though nature does indeed appear to be the design of a luminous intelligence, a God who could be deduced from such a design would not be the God of faith, of children, of the saints.<sup>26</sup>

1. Attacking these five attempts is the stock-in-trade of the spate of “New Atheist” books. These books do not advance the discussion; their various ideas—that a purported “pure nature” or “pure science” can be neutral or free of metaphysics;<sup>27</sup> that creation is a mechanism; that “first” and “cause” mean only “temporally first” and “mechanically caused”; that the Genesis story is a form of primitive, bad science, rather than, for example and among other things, a grand polemic against determinism<sup>28</sup>—these have all been refuted with great care and profundity, and those refutations have never been answered.<sup>29</sup>

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25. In recent years, much apologetics concerning creation has focused on the evolution debate—a war of bumper stickers in the popular mind: the Christian fish, inscribed ICTHYOS, or the fish with legs, inscribed DARWIN.

26. See for example Edith Stein’s discussion in *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), 109–10.

27. “Naturalism . . . is a metaphysical (which is to say ‘extra-natural’) conclusion regarding the whole of reality, which neither reason nor experience legitimately warrants. It cannot even define itself within the boundaries of its own terms, because the total sufficiency of ‘natural’ explanations is not an identifiable natural phenomenon but only an arbitrary judgment” (David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013], 17).

28. See, for example, Joseph Ratzinger, “*In the Beginning*”: *A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995).

29. Two suggestions for further reading: Michael Hanby, *No God, No Sci-*

The books clearly have ideological purposes, and are built on a reductive science, a strictly and brutally utilitarian ethics, a mechanistic ontology, and an anthropology destructive of human life, freedom and dignity. A great deal is presumed, including a biblical literalism that even the earliest Church Fathers would have rejected. The authors are intelligent people who are quite capable of understanding what theology actually teaches, yet, disingenuously, each “Christian” position they present is what one wag calls a “straw son,” the descendant of a straw man: a position obscurely descended from one that was never held to begin with.

While one might be tempted to say with Dante that these writers have “lost the good of intellect”<sup>30</sup> and it would be best simply to “look, and pass”;<sup>31</sup> their perspective, or something like it, has become the very fabric of the culture, and since apologetics is the evangelization of the culture, we desire dialogue that excludes no one, including “those who are hostile to the Church and persecute her in various ways.”<sup>32</sup> Some New Atheists call themselves “Brights,” but the light they imagine they emit is the harsh and artificial glare of a bare light bulb in a cold-war Eastern Bloc stairwell, claustrophobic, devoid of beauty, luminosity, and splendor. There is something inhuman about the “self-proclaimed exclusivity [of] the positivist reason which recognizes nothing beyond mere functionality.”<sup>33</sup> Wonder is eclipsed and freedom shrivels; wonder, says D.C. Schindler, “can be held open only if questioning receives a positive answer that is, in itself, inexhaustible,”<sup>34</sup> yet there are so many questions

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*ence? Theology, Cosmology, Biology* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), and Conor Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010).

30. Dante, *Inferno*, III, 18.

31. *Ibid.*, 51.

32. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 104, referencing *Gaudium et spes*, 92.

33. Benedict XVI, “The Listening Heart: Reflections on the Foundations of Law,” Address to the German Parliament (Berlin, 22 September 2011): “The windows must be flung open again, we must see the wide world, the sky and the earth once more . . . .”

34. D.C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013), 226.

one is not even permitted to articulate.<sup>35</sup> Nothing grows here; in fact the very notion of “life” disappears, as does nature itself. In the end, it is the world of Enoch Emery in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*. Enoch steals a shrunken, desiccated, mummified man—a substitute Holy Child, a new Jesus—from a park museum, no longer even understanding the inborn longing to worship that he retains in a materialistic world that

resembles a concrete bunker with no windows, in which we ourselves provide lighting and atmospheric conditions, being no longer willing to obtain either from God’s wide world. And yet we cannot hide from ourselves the fact that even in this artificial world, we are still covertly drawing upon God’s raw materials, which we refashion into our own products.<sup>36</sup>

The Péguy poem with which we opened continues, “In order not to believe, you would have to do violence to yourself. Harden yourself. Run yourself backwards, turn yourself inside-out, thwart yourself.” The reference to Enoch’s mummy as the materialist’s Holy Child is not far from the mark. The deformed view of creation under a technocratic mentality opens the door to a heart-hardened hostility to children, who become products of their parents’ arbitrary choices rather than the fruit of their love, or cancers on the earth and rivals to endangered species, or resources to be harvested for parts, or nothing more than carriers for “selfish genes,” or violent interlopers, as in Judith Jarvis Thompson’s well-known “violinist” analogy for abortion.<sup>37</sup> These evince an astonishingly mechanical and extrinsic notion

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35. A fellow student once said to Edith Stein, in reference to a professor who “reduced to silence by his superior dialectic and biting irony” anyone who disagreed with him (or sought to introduce an unapproved perspective): “There are things which one dares not even think during Hönigswald’s seminar. Yet outside of class, I cannot ignore them” (*Life in a Jewish Family* [Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1999], 186).

36. Benedict XVI, “The Listening Heart,” Address to the German Parliament.

37. We are asked to imagine a woman who is kidnapped and then hooked up to a dying violinist against her will; if she unhooks herself, he will die. She is entitled to do so, she says; the analogy concedes the personhood of the unborn child but argues that one still is not morally bound to that child. Judith Jarvis Thompson, “A Defense of Abortion,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1971).

of relationship that radically falsifies, in fact annihilates, the very meaning not only of “mother” and “child” but by extension our relationship with the natural entities of creation and with God. The culture that makes these arguments draws the hearer into the circle of loss, a loss of ontological goodness, beauty, and truth, where there is no vision of freedom as embodying the mutual good of persons, where even one’s own child is seen as an oppressive and degrading burden, not a gift and blessing. Why would anyone want to live like this, in this inhuman understanding of, and rupture from, ourselves, the natural world, and each other?

2. Excessive regard for technical making empties the world of the wonder that comes so naturally to children, wonder at newness of being, “the same absolute wonder which is the basic attitude of philosophy.”<sup>38</sup> Other ecological philosophies would like to recapture it. A second group, the various “sciences of complexity”<sup>39</sup> such as emergence theories, want to bring back a sense of enchantment, generated by the notion that the universe itself is responsible for the forms of nature that emerge within it.<sup>40</sup> The claim is that *all* forms are included, and that spiritual and moral attributes are natural forms. A representative example is that of the “emergence” of gratitude:

Gratitude is the most important facet of the spiritual life, allowing us to acknowledge and express our awe and our

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38. Balthasar, *Man in History*, 258.

39. Emergence theories reject reductive mechanistic accounts and say that the behavior of higher-order systems cannot be deduced by analysis of the elements that go into it. Similarly, for chaos theory, “The interaction of components on one scale can lead to complex global behavior on a larger scale that in general cannot be deduced from the knowledge of the individual components” (James P. Crutchfield, et al., “Chaos,” *Scientific American* 255 [December 1986]: 56). Obviously these theories do have great explanatory value in many contexts.

40. “The entities, precisely the sub-intellectual art works of . . . creative nature, bear the mark of an unconditionally original imaginative power to which one must be blind if one—I do not say classifies their forms within the evolutionary process, but [rather] explains them entirely on the grounds of their position within this process. [Their beauty and perfection] presupposes . . . a superior and playful freedom beyond all the constraints of nature” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990], 620–21).

reverence. A universe that “spawns because it is” generates our capacity to spawn because we are, inviting us to wrap our arms and minds and hearts around this astonishing whole to which we owe our lives and of which we are a part, and gasp our stammering gratitude.<sup>41</sup>

This sense of gratitude should not be disparaged, and surely its awakening is greatly preferable to the mechanistic indifference of the New Atheists. But what does it mean to direct our gratitude to the “astonishing whole” from which nothing escapes? Nothing transcends this whole, for even transcendence itself is captured and renamed “horizontal transcendence.”<sup>42</sup> Within this flat horizon, one is left puzzled at what there is ultimately to be astonished at—if nothing transcends, nothing unites our disparate feelings of gratitude. If we enter a welcoming home, are we grateful to the oven where the bread is baking, to the fireplace that gives us such festive warmth—or to the persons who provided these things and who are immanent in them in the most meaningful way precisely because they transcend them as givers? A nebulous gratitude to an amorphous totality is better than in-

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41. Ursula Goodenough and Terrence E. Deacon, “The Sacred Emergence of Nature” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 868. Stein and the Catechism of the Catholic Church remind us that Augustine said, “Si comprehendis, non est Deus” (If you comprehend it, it is not God) (*Sermo* 52, 16: PL 38, 360).

42. “Transcendence is commonly used to denote a discontinuity, as in the ‘top-down’ agency of transcendent deity. But transcendence also aptly describes the phenomenon of emergence, where discontinuities (‘something elses’) arise from, while remaining tethered to, their antecedents (‘nothing buts’). This mode of understanding transcendence [is called] . . . ‘horizontal transcendence’” (Goodenough and Deacon, “The Sacred Emergence of Nature,” 867–68). But that is precisely what we do not mean by transcendence, which specifically refers to a qualitatively different level. Formal theories or sequences like that of Fibonacci may “emerge” from numbers, and the sequence may have properties not found in the constituent numbers, but the sequence does not “transcend” the numbers; the mathematician transcends both the numbers and the sequence. As Pope Francis says, “We are losing our attitude of wonder, of contemplation, of listening to creation, and thus we no longer manage to interpret in it what Benedict XVI calls ‘the rhythm of the love-story between God and man.’ Why does this happen? Why do we think and live horizontally? We have drifted away from God, we no longer read his signs” (General Audience, 5 June 2013). The horizontal “must be integrated into the vertical since the latter gives it both meaning and form” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5: *The Last Act* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998], 29–30).

difference, but first, we have not grasped the totality at all,<sup>43</sup> and second, the gratitude is not yet true thanksgiving (*eucharistia*), a topic to which we shall return.

These ecologists say that their perspective on what is unexpected and novel in nature, rejected as capricious and hence irrelevant by positivist science, “opens countless opportunities to encounter and celebrate the magical while remaining mindful of the fully natural basis of each encounter”;<sup>44</sup> this occurs through the vicissitudes of each entity’s individual history, and the introduction of contingency:

Whereas contingent is often understood to mean accidental or fortuitous, its etymology (*contingere*, to touch, meet) carries the sense of dependency, of something being conditional on something else, and this certainly maps on to the core understanding of the emergentist perspective.<sup>45</sup>

While contingency does include depending upon some prior condition, state, or thing, most importantly for our purposes, “contingency . . . is the condition of any essence logically distinct from its own existence—which is to say, the failure of a thing’s proper description to provide any intrinsic rationale for that thing’s existence.”<sup>46</sup> Ecologists generally adopt Heidegger’s critique of the supposed Christian view of creation as the fabrication of products by a kind of Supreme Being or Demiurge, with the things of nature as the resultant disenchanting factory output, but their own substitutions are no better, even if the pictures they invoke seem more sophisticated. There is a loss of *true* “enchantment,” a childlike, metaphysical wonder at the gratuitous gift of being that lies at the heart of each created thing and all of them together; there is, as Balthasar says, no “space for wonder at the fact that there is *something rather than nothing*, but only for admiration that everything appears so wonderfully and beauti-

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43. “What ‘enters into our understanding’ is in relation to that totality of meaning like some forlorn sounds of a symphony which are carried a long distance by the wind until they finally reach our ear” (Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 113).

44. Goodenough and Deacon, “The Sacred Emergence of Nature,” 867.

45. *Ibid.*, 866.

46. Hart, *The Experience of God*, 100.

fully ordered within the necessity of being.”<sup>47</sup> And so this redefined contingency is not radical enough; it does not reach to the contingency of the whole that is at issue.<sup>48</sup> An entire contingent horizontal chain of events, or quantum fluctuations, or anything else, cannot explain itself. The questions of origin, newness, and surprise are not answered but merely postponed.

3. A third group, the eco-phenomenologists—influenced by Goethe, Heidegger, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and Hans Jonas—believe it is necessary to unmask the assumptions of modernity, which lay the “conceptual groundwork for the modern worldview in which an intrinsically-meaningless objective realm (‘nature’) is separated epistemically from—and so needs to be mastered through the activities of—isolated, self-certain subjects.”<sup>49</sup> A volume of collected essays entitled *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself* deliberately echoes the rallying call of Husserlian phenomenology, “Back to the things themselves.”<sup>50</sup> It takes as a starting point the phenomenological fact of living beings in their full concrete experience, pursuing relationality, and as David Woods says, “There is no richer dimension of relationality than time.”<sup>51</sup> The tension between time and eternity opens up another tension, between finite and infinite—“an invisible in the heart of the visible to the extent that the temporal articulateness of things is not itself obviously presented in their immediate appearance.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, there is more to things than meets the eye, a “sense of the infinite in

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47. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, 613–14. See discussion at 619ff. Ecologists tend to resort to magical explanations—like the famous New Yorker cartoon showing a blackboard with a mathematical equation, numerical premises on one side and a conclusion on the other, and in the middle the words “Here a miracle occurs.”

48. “The contingency of individual things is indisputable, but the contingency of the world as a whole is not accepted” (Ratzinger, *In The Beginning*, 83).

49. Iain Thomson, “Ontology and Ethics at the Intersection of Phenomenology and Environmental Philosophy,” *Inquiry* 47, no. 4 (2004): 382.

50. *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, ed. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), xi.

51. David Wood, “What Is Eco-Phenomenology?” in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, 213.

52. *Ibid.*, 215.

the finite,” an “intensification of the concrete” in which each moment is given “depth.”<sup>53</sup> The consideration of these polar tensions, made concrete in the regular rhythms of nature such as the synchronicity of fireflies lighting up at the end of the evening or the periodicity of the hatching of cicadas, interrupted by the breakthroughs of the unexpected, preserves us “against a premature holism, an over-enthusiastic drive to integration. . . . *We need a model of the whole as something that will inevitably escape our model of it.*”<sup>54</sup>

Assuredly it is true that there is an ever-greater that always escapes our attempts to contain reality, to capture it in a totality or meta-narrative, and much eco-phenomenological thought is, to an extent, compatible with a Catholic understanding of nature, and with some Catholic language.<sup>55</sup> But it is not sufficient for a Catholic apologetics; there is a falling short: the depth is not yet ontological, time is not yet the fullness of time, and many phenomenologists themselves say that the key trouble is with an inability to rightfully deal with persons. Philosophical phenomenology itself is far more sophisticated than the popular form, later adopted by many non-philosophically trained ecologists. John Paul II, himself an expert in phenomenology, stressed the need for its completion by an adequate metaphysics. In our experience of nature, he said,

We face a great challenge . . . to move from *phenomenon* to *foundation*, a step as necessary as it is urgent. We cannot stop short at experience alone; . . . speculative thinking must penetrate to the spiritual core and the ground from which it rises.<sup>56</sup>

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53. *Ibid.*, 216.

54. *Ibid.*, 217. Emphasis added.

55. The creature is constituted to receive others within itself, and at the same time is always open to “an other who is always already ‘beyond’ the self . . . . Each creature bears *within itself* as gift an *excess* signifying the presence of a transcendent other-giver. This excess we may term mystery” (David L. Schindler, “The Given as Gift: Creation and Disciplinary Abstraction in Science,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 38 [Spring 2011]: 52–102, at 83).

56. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 83. We see the same movement in Edith Stein. What Aidan Nichols says of John Paul II and Balthasar is true also of Stein—that they “aimed so to use phenomenology as to ground phenomena in



What is common to positivistic environmentalism, “deep ecology,” emergent ecology, secular eco-phenomenology, and even, too often, to Christian ecology, and what causes persons and the rest of the created order to be so radically misunderstood, is that the act of creation itself is misconceived. Primary and secondary causality are mingled into one. True creation, creation *ex nihilo* (“being-called-forth-from-nothingness”<sup>57</sup>), is the communication of being itself, of existence, and so speaks of an ontological contingency and dependence operative at every instant rather than an event in the distant past. What is so odd is how very difficult it is to get people to see the ontological distinction, to see that the question concerns the very conditions of existence itself, of the very possibility of laws, of anything existing at all. This is a pandemic problem, and neither native intelligence nor advanced education inoculates one against it. It requires something like the shift in aspect necessary for seeing an optical illusion, rather than the addition of new material to the picture; it does not give us more information but qualifies, like the play of light, the manner in which we see. When the act is misunderstood, so is the entire created order. Creation *ex nihilo* means that created things, in their composite nature of essence and existence, are both intelligible and at the same time inexhaustible; and an abyss of mystery lies at the heart of every created thing. And only when the act of creation *ex nihilo* is grasped does one grasp the true meaning of “contingency” and “dependence” and the paradigmatic meaning of the Child for creation, for “to be a child,” says Balthasar, is to “owe one’s existence to another.”<sup>58</sup>

4. Kenneth Schmitz says that “the expansion of our

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real ontology” (*Say It Is Pentecost: A Guide Through Balthasar’s Logic* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001], 211). In *Knowledge and Faith*, Stein says that phenomenology stresses receptivity—its mode of inquiry differs from “trends of modern philosophy wherein thinking means ‘constructing’ and knowledge a ‘creation’ of the inquiring understanding” (46). “It has been apparent that she broke out of the limiting confines of Husserlian phenomenology to explore the unlimited horizon of metaphysical inquiry— inquiry which was off-limits for Husserl’s ‘rigorous science’” (Mary Catharine Baseheart, *Person in the World: Introduction to the Philosophy of Edith Stein* [Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2010], 110).

57. Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 170.

58. Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 49.

glance beyond the postmodern horizon is already under way, not so much through postmodern criticism as through the efficacy of environmental concern.”<sup>59</sup> It is telling that ecological postmodern criticism itself has sought to expand beyond its own limits, and has adapted language that escalates to a near-theological level. This fourth group of secular philosophers says that in considering nature, perhaps we need not dualism, not dialectic, but something “trialectical” or “triadic.”<sup>60</sup> Ecologist David Abrams speaks of the “embeddedness” of the flesh in the world, an “incarnate” dimension.<sup>61</sup> Postmodern ecologist Romand Coles, borrowing heavily from Adorno, says that we need “reconciliation” as “togetherness in diversity,” “a reciprocal gift giving,” “the humility to recognize that we are beings that receive more than we can return in this encounter.”<sup>62</sup> Even in regard to the non-human other, we need “an imaginative generosity that seeks to enter the other’s voice into the dialogue through which one’s actions emerge.”<sup>63</sup> Perhaps most revealing, ecologist Barry Lopez says we need to borrow “*agape*” as “an expression of intense spiritual affinity with the mystery . . . a humble, impassioned embrace of something outside the self.”<sup>64</sup>

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59. Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Recovery of Wonder: The New Freedom and the Asceticism of Power* (Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), xi–xii. When apologists turn to environmental thought, it is generally to “deep ecology” or related versions of “holism,” which privilege a purely horizontal relationality: entities become processes, temporary phenomenal constructs in an endless flow, dissolving any ontological or axiological differences between persons and other created beings. Though “deep ecology” still lives on in the popular press, these philosophies of identity were quickly rejected by postmodern eco-philosophers, who saw in it a reverse image of the univocity and linguistic naiveté of modernity. They opted instead for equivocity in emergence and the tensions of ambiguity.

60. Adrian J. Ivakhiv, “Thinking Through Three Deities,” *Immanence* (blog), 3 March 2012, <http://blog.uvm.edu/aivakhiv/2012/03/14/thinking-through-threes-deities/>.

61. David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997). See, for example, p. 63.

62. Romand Coles, “Ecotones and Environmental Ethics,” *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 233, 239.

63. *Ibid.*, 236.

64. Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 250.

Yet however amenable the language of gift, generosity, and humility is in these postmodern ecologists (as St. Paul points out to the men of Athens, they have it partly right), their terms “trialectic,” togetherness-in-diversity, an “incarnate dimension,” and especially “*agape*,” are asymptotes, forever straining toward but never reaching the deepest heart of the mystery of creation: the interpersonal life of the Trinity. It is a truth of revelation that creation is a gift of the triune God of love. “To create means to give,” says John Paul II, “and he who gives, loves.”<sup>65</sup> Every created thing receives its being and life as a participation in the generous and overflowing love of the Persons of the Trinity.

The revelation of God in his Son Jesus Christ, and with it, the deepest revelation of the nature and the end of all the reality, ratifies that logical and teleological sense of the non-human environment. It offers the final and deepest explanation of its meaning: in the beginning was the Logos and through him all was created. In this way, finite reality, once understood as a “*physis*” enclosed upon itself, is now known as “creation.” The windows are opened.<sup>66</sup>

#### EDITH STEIN’S VALLEY

Where then does an apologetics of creation start, if creation itself is so often obscured by too-shallow ecological philosophies? Again we must return to the child, specifically, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s image of the mother’s smile—a relationship also hymned by Péguy—that reveals the original unity in which consciousness awakens. An ellipse of love with two irreducible, interacting poles, one prior to the other, this embracing smile is also an image of God and the created order, for this dramatic encounter opens into wonder at all being, extending beyond the interpersonal to include the entire natural world: the things of nature attract by their Beauty; are bearers of logos, of meaning coextensive with Truth; and bring about both awareness of and response to the Good. The smile of the mother reverberates in the “smile” of created things—as Dante writes, “what

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65. John Paul II, General Audience (5 March 1986), 2.

66. Quesada, “Nature, Culture, and the Theology of Reconciliation.”

I saw seemed to me a smile of the universe”<sup>67</sup>—which reaches, without deduction or interpretation, to the depth of being and to God, for “although it derives from a concrete encounter and thus does not at all communicate an abstract concept of being, this intuition is wholly unbounded and reaches to the ultimate, to the Divine.”<sup>68</sup>

A mark of the saints is the humility of a spiritual childlikeness that retains the original receptivity to creation. Edith Stein was a great intellectual and a philosopher not usually thought of as “childlike,” but who approaches reality with the openness of a child. We turn now to an experience Stein describes, to borrow the words of Balthasar, “of which all one knows to begin with is just that it exists,” yet which ultimately reveals God’s presence. While there are poets and writers who make us feel the numinous awe of childhood wonder—think of the chapter “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn” in *The Wind in the Willows*—Stein does something rare. She both shows *and* tells, reveals *and* explains, God’s presence in creation. At the same time, in her encounter “our most ultimate discoveries and our most basic starting assumptions reciprocally illuminate each other, and through simultaneous ascent and descent reason penetrates ever more profoundly into its object.”<sup>69</sup> Stein’s luminous example is one of encountering transcendence within the immanence of a concrete experience of beauty in creation, and she witnesses both to the catholicity of reason and to the possibility of seeing creation as an apologetics for itself.

We opened with the beauty of the stars and now return to them in a concrete encounter in which Edith Stein deepens the metaphysics of creation from a consideration of “existence” to the depths of trinitarian love and relationship in a trajectory that follows Balthasar and Dante. This moment, perhaps drawn from her hikes in the Black Forest, unfolds creation as its own apologetics. Deliberately choosing an inanimate example to make her point clear, she describes

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67. Dante, *Paradiso* XXVII 4–5. “Ciò ch’io vedeva me sembiava un riso de l’universo.”

68. Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 18.

69. D.C. Schindler, *Catholicity of Reason*, 289.

a valley, enclosed by pale walls of rock, not very high, bathed in moonlight, vaulted by a sky of sparkling stars, against which the contours of the rocks clearly emerge, though without any sharpness. It is a picture of indescribably clear, gentle, and peaceful beauty.<sup>70</sup>

She takes pains to say that the term “indescribable” is in the strict sense; the beauty is quite literally indescribable, not because it is unintelligible, but because it will be revealed as inexhaustible: “The fullness of the world we perceive with our senses holds more than we can understand through the methods of natural science. . . . [It is] nature revealing itself to us as a whole and in each of its parts, yet ever remaining a mystery.”<sup>71</sup> It is apparent that the beauty is not material, “though the whole form to which it adheres is constructed of material things, and material qualities essentially determine the impression of the whole,”<sup>72</sup> for as we drink in this lovely scene in an attitude of receptive openness, something of its clarity, gentleness, and peace is communicated to us, and we perceive the resulting disposition of the soul as “spiritual.”<sup>73</sup> One might argue that the feeling of peace is merely our own subjective state projected onto the landscape, but this contradicts our experience of clarity and gentleness “as characteristics of the valley itself, even if we ourselves are internally distraught and without peace, and perceive our inner opposition to the character of the landscape as something painful.”<sup>74</sup> And should we be transformed interiorly—brought into harmony with what we behold—we experience this harmony as a gift, as something coming from the landscape itself.<sup>75</sup> The saint’s vision of nature is that of a shared community of being, pregnant with meaning, and not of a collection of objects or a malevolent power

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70. Edith Stein, *Der Aufbau der menschlichen Person* (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1994), 114. There is no English translation; all translations are by the author.

71. Stein, *Knowledge and Faith*, 99.

72. Stein, *Der Aufbau*, 114. I am indebted to Miguel Salazar of the Sodality Christianae Vitae for first pointing out these passages to me.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*, 114–15.

75. *Ibid.*, 115.

against which our nature revolts in an antagonistic superiority; compare, for example, Kant's experience of rock cliffs and the heavens.<sup>76</sup>

Our experience—the connection between the structural properties of natural things and the meaning we perceive—is not arbitrary but organic: in the person, the concrete sense and the symbolic meaning are “linked internally, correspond to each other.”<sup>77</sup> Among Stein's examples are a moonlit night, in which “everything harsh, sharp, and glaring is muted and soothed,” leading to a “gentle lucidity of the spirit . . . a deep, grateful repose,”<sup>78</sup> and granite, so fitting for monuments that will outlast the human race, striking our senses as strong and massive, and also quite naturally speaking to us of unwavering reliability and sheltering care.<sup>79</sup> These powerful symbolic correlations are not found in the glare of the desert at noon, or with clay or sand.<sup>80</sup>

Stein draws on an analogy with persons, who are also

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76. Immanuel Kant: “Bold, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs, thunder clouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder . . . etc., make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power. But . . . [we] found in our own faculty of reason . . . a superiority over nature itself even in its immeasurability: likewise the irresistibility of its power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent to it and a superiority over nature” (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 144–45).

77. Stein, *Der Aufbau*, 116. The nature of created, material things is “not exhausted in their spatial being.” Not just “external analogies” for “linguistic metaphors often express an inner relationship that exists between different genera of existents as well as between finite existents and the divine archetypal reality . . . it is of the essence of everything material and spatial to be a symbol of something immaterial or spiritual. This is its mysterious meaning and its hidden inwardness. . . . And so we see that in its essence each and every thing bears within itself its own mystery and thereby points beyond itself. . . .” (Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 244). See also her discussion on the “Difference in the Character of the Symbol: ‘Emblem’ and ‘Cosmic Expression,’” in *Science of the Cross*, trans. Josephine Koepfel (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2003), 38ff.

78. Stein, *Science of the Cross*, 40. There is a particularly beautiful passage on pages 39–40 on night as symbol.

79. Stein, *Der Aufbau*, 116.

80. *Ibid.*

present to us as material forms. Clearly the inner impressions that arise in us are not our own subjective projection.<sup>81</sup> The human spirit “speaks” through a whole, a structural form rich in meaning. Analogously, in nature, “color and spatial forms, light and darkness, rigidity and strength, the form of the whole—all have meaning, through them something spiritual speaks.”<sup>82</sup>

The spiritual meaning of nature is something we can share in, something nature gives us while at the same time preserving it,<sup>83</sup> as the diffusiveness of the Good does not diminish the Good, but rather unites with creaturely being while at the same time remaining distinct from it. And so “precisely what makes the material and spatial a symbol of the spiritual makes it likewise a symbol of the eternal.”<sup>84</sup> The meanings we perceive in nature, concrete and symbolic,

both point beyond themselves to suggest a personal spirit which is behind the visible world, who has given every entity its meaning, has shaped it according to the place that was intended for it in the structure of the whole, who wrote this “great book of nature” and thus speaks to the human spirit.<sup>85</sup>

Who is this spirit that speaks to the human spirit, who enters and decisively breaks open what would otherwise be what Benedict calls our windowless bunker (“*in seinen Lebenszusam-*

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81. This isn’t animism, Stein says. The things of nature do not become persons, and “we have no right to award them a soul (that would indeed be ‘projection’).” See also Robert Spaemann: “Beyond such analogy, any attempt to say what animal life ‘really’ is, leads into fantasy, of which materialistic reductionism is the most irresponsible form” (*Happiness and Benevolence* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000], 117).

82. Stein, *Der Aufbau*, 115.

83. “Es geht etwas von ihnen aus, was wir in uns aufnehmen können und was doch in ihnen bewahrt bleibt” (ibid.).

84. Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 244.

85. Stein, *Der Aufbau*, 116–117. Cf. Aquinas’s *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*, which Stein translated into German: “Res ergo naturalis inter duos intellectus constituta” (q. 2, a. 2). And she continues: “So there is no structure without spirit—formed matter is permeated with spirit. The form is not a personal spirit, is not a soul, but it is meaning, coming from personal spirit and speaking to personal spirit, participating in the context of his life. So, it is objectively justified to speak of ‘objective spirit.’”

*menhang eingreifend*”<sup>86</sup>)? Using Heidegger’s language, Stein says that if we find ourselves, as *Dasein*, “thrown” into existence, “the question concerning the thrower cannot be suppressed.”<sup>87</sup> The eternal spirit continuously present in all of creation is personal, a Person, present as Love: the mysterious interplay of the *esse*/existence distinction, the key ontological insight of Aquinas into the act of creation, is analogous to love between persons. “The way of faith,” says Stein, “gives us more than the way of philosophic knowledge. Faith reveals to us the God of personal nearness, the loving and merciful one, and therewith we are given a certitude which no natural knowledge can impart.”<sup>88</sup>

Before looking more deeply at “the loving and merciful one,” we must note that the similarities and differences between the two ways of knowing must be rightly understood. Faith does not simply pick up where reason leaves off, as if reason and faith were two separate, juxtaposed methods. The catholicity of reason is both said and shown in the encounter, which is for Stein a *Gestalt*, a whole, with movements of both ascent and descent. In natural knowledge,

When at a later moment [the mind grasps] something in the object it has not grasped before, it must add what is given later along with what was given before. This it will be able to do only if it has already grasped in a certain way what was given before.<sup>89</sup>

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86. Stein, *Der Aufbau*, 117.

87. Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 556, note 34.

88. *Ibid.*, 60.

89. Stein, *Knowledge and Faith*, 68. Stein continues, “When the be-ing that is known in the mental life of the knowing person, the actual content is given at every now-moment by the actuality phase and the reflection falling together. . . . The actuality phase harks back into the past and is kept in retention. At the same time, what previously had been anticipated as potential blends with what is now actual (by fulfilling it or countering it) and is taken up into the synthetic unity which had already been anticipated at the outset of the experience . . .” Cf. D.C. Schindler, who says that if revelation recasts the meaning of something previously known by reason “by revealing a more profound content to it than was initially evident, reason will rejoice in the discovery precisely as reason: it will experience the disclosure as an unanticipated fulfillment, that is, as a genuine novelty (a posteriori) that is what it always wanted (a priori) without knowing it” (*Catholicity of Reason*, 297).



In an analogous manner, this is true of the movement of faith to the Person of God: he was always immanent as the source, present along the way, and resplendent as the end. He is not deduced at the end of a chain of reasoning—he is not a purely a posteriori discovery, but neither must some irrational leap be made. While Stein acknowledges the limits of reason, it is not in the sense that reason tells us nothing at all about God; if that were the case, faith would remain an extrinsic and arbitrary imposition. Nor is it the case that whatever faith “adds” has no bearing whatsoever on what we knew before—natural knowledge is transfigured, as natural virtues are infused by grace. It would be more accurate to say that Stein speaks from the heart of reason to the heart of faith, and vice versa. These two ways of knowing mutually implicate each other, though asymmetrically; she reminds us of the Fourth Lateran Council’s “*major dissimilitudo*”<sup>90</sup> and says, “Reason would turn into unreason if it would stubbornly content itself with what it is able to discover with its own light, barring out everything which is made visible to it by a brighter and more sublime light.”<sup>91</sup>

If an apologetics of creation were simply about looking at the things of nature, we could still end up with seeing it as a mechanism. What Stein shows is not a “what” but a “way” of seeing; as John Paul II said:

We need first of all to foster . . . a contemplative outlook. . . . It is the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility. It is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image.<sup>92</sup>

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90. See for example Stein, *Knowledge and Faith*, 89, and *Finite and Eternal Being*, 554, note 11.

91. Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 22. Cf. *Fides et ratio*, 67: “Revelation endows these truths with their fullest meaning, directing them towards the richness of the revealed mystery in which they find their ultimate purpose. . . . Reason needs to be reinforced by faith, in order to discover horizons it cannot reach on its own.”

92. *Evangelium vitae*, 83. Stein echoes John Paul II’s “invitation to freedom”: “God wishes to let himself be found by those who seek him. Hence he wishes first to be sought. So we can see why natural revelation is not absolutely clear and unambiguous, but is rather an incentive to seek . . . faith is a gift that must be accepted. In faith, divine and human freedom meet. But it is a gift that

Stein has unfolded the meaning of contemplation as beginning with receptivity to objective reality.<sup>93</sup> This receptivity is not merely passive but an active reaching out in desire (*eros*) beyond ourselves and beyond any closed system of nature.<sup>94</sup> In the person's encounter with the valley, a "third" is revealed: all things, Stein says, stand together (*con-stare*) in the Logos,<sup>95</sup> for the logos of the world—all the meanings in the encounter—converge beyond our horizon in Christ, the Logos who is the Word, the archetype of all finite units of meaning.<sup>96</sup> As Benedict says, we live in "an open parabola" with our center or focus lying outside of us<sup>97</sup>—we are "ec-centric" beings—and so the *con-stare*, standing together, is at the same time ec-stasy, standing forth.

The creaturely act is first *contemplative*. . . . The creaturely act first "lets the other be" in its givenness as such. This letting be, as a response to being which, as created, is good and beautiful, is an act of wonder.<sup>98</sup>

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bids us ask for more" (*Knowledge and Faith*, 113–14).

93. Stein, *Knowledge and Faith*, 46: "receiving," being "led by the objective ratio" rather than modern philosophy where "thinking means 'constructing' and knowledge means a 'creation' of the inquiring understanding." For an account of why a contemplative attitude is needed for a fuller and truer science than the reduction to a mechanistic ontology proposed by Dawkins et al., see Michael Hanby: "[T]he very act which establishes the novel identity of every [concrete, intelligible universal and incommunicable particular] *ens* and differentiates it substantially from every other binds it into an antecedent order of actuality shared by every other. This is true not only of the objects of knowledge, but its subjects as well, whose acts of being and knowing implicate this antecedent order in their substantial identity. This antecedent order confirmed in the act of being and the mutual actuality of knower and known means that there is a priority of contemplative receptivity in all knowledge of the world, as indeed there must be if it is to be knowledge of the world. . . . My every action is therefore preceded, ontologically if not temporally, by an act of contemplative receptivity" (*No God, No Science?*, 390).

94. It is also not a merely psychological "disposition" but rather includes the objective priority of object to subject.

95. Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 112.

96. *Ibid.*, 112–13.

97. Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *Dogma and Preaching* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 386.

98. David L. Schindler, "The Given as Gift," 83.

Balthasar notes that the “child is a master of contemplation,” the “humbling gaze” before reality, and that the masters among the Fathers of the Church were all “lovers of childhood.” Theirs is a contemplation that “sees in the childlikeness of the Son ultimately the reflection of the eternal newness of the whole Trinitarian life.”<sup>99</sup>

We have now returned to the “loving and merciful one.” While the “New Atheists” and postmodern ecologists often speak about God—usually negatively—the truth of the Trinity, that the “one” is the “three-in-one,” is utterly opaque to them. For Stein, by contrast, the metaphysics of creation, rooted in the gift of being, flowers in the Trinity:

We have ascended to the divine being by starting out from creaturely being. . . . We have also crossed that borderline which is indicative of what can be learned about the creator from creatures and of what God himself has revealed concerning his own nature. Without crossing this borderline, it would be impossible to learn anything about creaturely being as viewed from the perspective of the divine being. We thus look in the Triune Deity for the archetype of what in the realm of creaturely being we have designated as meaning and fullness of life.<sup>100</sup>

A shared participation and grounding in a common source, a clear distinction of beings who are bound together in love, is the *imago trinitatis* in the created order. Against positivistic science, to distinguish is to unite, not divide, at the deepest level. The relationality of all existents is not only biological and social, but ontological, and beyond this, they are seen also in their most profound beauty

because they are now seen from the vantage point of the foundational and transcendent reality of God . . . via a Logos who is a Person in a trinitarian communion of Persons, who create, within this communal dynamic, in an overabundance of love which explains the logical and teleological sense that can be perceived in creation.<sup>101</sup>

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99. Balthasar, *Man in History*, 254–55, 257: “This total poverty is the way and condition of true contemplation.”

100. Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 418.

101. Quesada, “Nature, Culture, and the Theology of Reconciliation.”

## THE ETERNAL CHILD

If Stein embodies the open receptivity of the child, she also embodies another characteristic of the child: trust. "Sustained in existence from moment to moment" we are each a "nothinged being" (*ein nichtiges Sein*).<sup>102</sup> From the perspective of Heidegger, this should occasion anxiety; for Stein, only under pathological conditions would we live in such dread. This is not because we are deluding ourselves, but because the knowledge of our nothingness is counterbalanced by the "equally undeniable fact that . . . being holds me, I rest securely. This security, however, is not the self-assurance of one who under her own power stands on firm ground, but rather the sweet and blissful security of a child that is lifted up and carried by a strong arm."<sup>103</sup> Péguy speaks of the child sleeping in his mother's arms, "laughing secretly because of his confidence in his mother."<sup>104</sup>

The image of the child in his mother's arms opens a dimension that ecological philosophy never confronts and without which creation can never be fully understood. "In theological language," said Stein, "the coherence of meaning of all existents in the Logos is called the divine plan of creation."<sup>105</sup> Christ the Logos, the "image of the invisible God,"<sup>106</sup> the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his nature,"<sup>107</sup> the "coherence of meaning" through whom all was created, has entered his creation:

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102. "A nothinged being" is Baseheart's translation (*Person in the World*, 116).

103. Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 58. She continues, "if a child were living in the constant fear that its mother might let it fall, we should hardly call this a 'rational' attitude."

104. Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 128.

105. Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 114. "The Logos . . . shows, as it were, a double countenance, the one mirroring the one and simple divine nature, the other mirroring the manifold of finite existents. The Logos is the divine nature (as object of divine knowledge), and it is the manifold of meaningful existence of created things as encompassed by the divine intelligence and as reflecting the divine nature in images and likenesses" (119).

106. Col 1:15.

107. Heb 1:3.

The novelty of Christian proclamation does not consist in a thought, but in a deed: God has revealed himself. Yet this is no blind deed, but one which is itself Logos—the presence of eternal reason in our flesh. *Verbum caro factum est*: just so, amid what is made (*factum*) there is now Logos, Logos is among us. Creation (*factum*) is rational. Naturally, the humility of reason is always needed in order to accept it: man’s humility, which responds to God’s humility.<sup>108</sup>

Creation, where the plan of God is made visible, is inseparable from the Incarnation. And because Christ was born as a child, and remains—in humility, receptiveness, obedience, and trust—a child of the Father, then he reveals, redeems, and transfigures the very meaning of childhood. Christ calls us to “turn and become like children,” whose “angels always behold the face of my Father. . . . Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter into it.”<sup>109</sup> And in the face of the near-contempt for children in some philosophies, he reminds us that whoever welcomes a child, welcomes him.<sup>110</sup>

Being childlike in the Christian sense is not at odds with being a mature Christian; in fact one who does so is “the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>111</sup> To become childlike in the sense we are called to is not to return to infantilism or to a sentimentalized Romantic version of innocence, lost in the past: in Christ, through the waters of baptism, the forgiveness of sin, and the life of grace, the “longing for a lost innocence and oneness with God that Jesus and Mary never lost . . . always lies before us.”<sup>112</sup> Through Christ, the windows of the “concrete bunker” are opened: “the ways of the child, long since sealed off for the adult, open up in an original dimension in which everything unfolds within the bounds of the right, the true, the good . . . a sphere of original wholeness and health and . . . holiness.”<sup>113</sup>

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108. Benedict XVI, Meeting with Representatives from the World of Culture.

109. Mt 18:3,10; Mk 10:15.

110. Mt 18:5.

111. Mt 18:4.

112. Balthasar, *Man in History*, 257.

113. Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 12.

The rupture with reality could be said to be a *felix culpa* if it is followed by a new immediacy, an immediacy after reflection,<sup>114</sup> after suffering, after repentance.

The childlike stance embodies a stereoscopic vision, seeing each thing in creation—each star and stone and sparrow and flower—as something beautiful in itself and at the same time as a gift in and from another. Balthasar’s “smile of the mother” and Stein’s encounter with the valley—from the concrete beauty to the “indescribable mystery” to the “personal spirit”—retrace the path of Christ’s experience, the paradigm of all human experience:

We can be sure that the human Child Jesus was in amazement over everything: beginning with the existence of his loving mother, then passing on to his own existence, finally going from both to all the forms offered by the surrounding world, from the tiniest flower to the boundless skies. But this amazement derives from the much deeper amazement of the eternal Child who, in the absolute Spirit of Love, marvels at Love itself as it permeates and transcends all that is. . . . Through all ages of life the interpersonal *thou* abides as an unmasterable reality. . . . Now the Christian task lies in trying to deepen the erotic faculty from the surface of the senses into the depths of the heart. . . . “The Father is greater than I” lies hidden in all human experiences.<sup>115</sup>

This knowledge, spoken from the depths of reality to the depths of the human heart, points to the ontological foundation of the “gratitude” that confounded the emergent philosophers, and to the childlike thankfulness of the person, acting in community with the Church:

This has a second direct consequence: the elemental thanksgiving, the model for which we again see in the eternal Child Jesus. Thanksgiving, in Greek *eucharistia*, is the quintessence of Jesus’ stance toward the Father.<sup>116</sup>

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114. The phrase is Søren Kierkegaard’s (*Papers and Journals: A Selection* [London: Penguin Books, 1996], 299).

115. Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 45–47.

116. *Ibid.*

*Eucharistia* is the liturgy of the Church, the sphere of receptivity and mediator of the sacraments.<sup>117</sup> Through those sacraments, the work of the Incarnation will culminate in the assumption—pre-figured by Mary—of the whole of creation into the trinitarian life, for creation is also inseparable from the Redemption:

In the bread and wine that we bring to the altar, all creation is taken up by Christ the Redeemer to be transformed and presented to the Father. . . . The substantial conversion of bread and wine into his body and blood introduces within creation the principle of a radical change, a sort of “nuclear fission” . . . which penetrates to the heart of all being, a change meant to set off a process which transforms reality, a process leading ultimately to the transfiguration of the entire world, to the point where God will be all in all.<sup>118</sup>

Through the eyes of the child, creation is resplendent. Perhaps more than any other poet, Péguy opens up the fruitfulness of childhood—“the spring that . . . pours from the eternal mystery of the Childhood of God through the eternal mystery of the childhood of Christ into the eternal childhood which is given to men: eternal hope.”<sup>119</sup> If we would but become like children and see as through the eyes of Jesus, the incomparable Child, faith would indeed be obvious. “And the gaze of children is purer than the blue of the sky, than the milky sky, and than a star’s rays in the peaceful night.” □

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117. “Anyone acceding to a sacrament is a pure childlike receiver, even if he must contribute something of his own, but this something is nothing other than the perfect readiness of the child” (ibid., 52).

118. Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 47, 11.

119. Balthasar, *Man in History*, 256.