

A Fruitful Restraint: The Perennial Relevance of the Virtue of Studiousness

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IN THE half century since the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Catholic colleges and universities in America have been the setting of one long argument about the nature and purpose of education. The discussion has been increasingly poignant in recent years, as it has become difficult to ignore not only the secularization of Catholic higher education but its intellectual and pedagogical poverty as well.¹ The latest contribution to this conversation comes from an historian, Brad S. Gregory, who has portrayed the secularization of the Catholic university as the ironic and unintentional result of the papal promotion of Thomism. Gregory does not blame any defect in the thought of Aquinas, but instead points to a concomitant attribute as Thomism's tragic flaw, the "papal suspicion of scientific and historical knowledge-making." The cultural revolution that swept through Catholic faculties in the 1960s, on his account, involved the rejection of Thomism as a by-product of the "intellectual catching-up" that Catholic universities had to do. During this transformation, the "neo-Thomist subculture" was swept away at least in part because of its "timidity in the face of knowledge-making by

¹ Notably elegiac on both counts is Alasdair MacIntyre's "The End of Education: The Fragmentation of the American University," *Commonweal* (October 20, 2006): 10–14. See also the Symposium on MacIntyre's *God, Philosophy, Universities* in the Fall 2011 number of the English edition of *Nova et Vetera* (volume 9), especially Thomas Hibbs, "The Research University in Crisis (Again): MacIntyre's *God, Philosophy, Universities*," pages 947–66, which includes a helpful retrospective back to John Tracy Ellis and the debates of the 1950s.

secularizing research universities.”² As an explanation of the wholesale jettisoning of Thomistic philosophy and theology at Catholic colleges and universities, the account is a familiar one and not implausible.³ It is possible to point to bold attempts on the part of leading Thomists to breathe new life into the tradition, such as Charles de Koninck’s 1964 Medalist Address at the annual meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association and Ralph McInerny’s 1966 tract *Thomism in an Age of Renewal*.⁴ Yet these do seem to stand as exceptions to a general trend of retreat in the face of a confident and aggressive rival ideal: the Berlin-style research university.⁵

Gregory’s judgment seems to have been based on two principles: that all knowledge of the truth is good and that to attain it requires fortitude because its pursuit involves arduous work of reflection, investigation, argumentation, and even public debate. Both principles are unquestionably true and their relevance to Catholic intellectual life has been continually reaffirmed in recent years in such authoritative statements as Blessed John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio* and Benedict XVI’s celebrated Regensburg Address. The characterization of the development of educational institutions and practices over time, however, seems likely to benefit from an additional weighing of the principles of judgment. In particular, the prominence of the word “timidity” in Gregory’s account invites several questions in reply. May not a charge of timidity at times stem from a failure to recognize prudent restraint? Is courage the only or even the chief virtue governing the search for truth? Is there a role for temperance in the intellectual life, that is, for the wise moderation of the desire to know? Questions such as these not only are relevant to the task of constructing a convincing historical narrative but also point to matters of enduring relevance to the pursuit of truth.

Among the many effects of the secularization of the modern university, one has been a growing awareness that its institutional forms and practices and the habits that they inculcate ought not simply to be taken

² Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 360–64.

³ Gregory notes his debt to the standard narrative, Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Like Gregory, Gleason located the problem in the neighborhood of a defect in fortitude, using the word “malaise” to describe the loss of confidence in Thomism that developed through the 1960s.

⁴ Charles de Koninck, “Three Sources of Philosophy,” *Proceedings of the ACPA* 38 (1964):13–22; Ralph M. McInerny, *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* (1966; reprinted Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

⁵ See George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), especially chapter 5: “American Practicality and Germanic Ideals: Two Visions for Reform.”

at face value by Catholics but should be evaluated in light of an understanding of a healthy “intellectual custom.”⁶ Jan Aertsen, for instance, has affirmed that there is a Thomistic “ethic of knowing,” whereas Thomas Hibbs has suggested that we ought to “conceive of the full range of our activities, including intellectual activities, as practices, involving a host of relevant virtues.”⁷ It is within just such a general understanding of the virtues of the intellectual life that claims about “timidity” or proper restraint in the face of “knowledge-making” can be usefully considered. It is my purpose to suggest a line of investigation into the topic, by taking note of two contemporary accounts of right intellectual appetite and then reflecting upon Aquinas’s conception of the virtue of studiousness.

In the context of an ambitious attempt to understand the virtues of the intellectual life, philosophers R. C. Roberts and W. J. Wood have identified a virtue they call the “love of knowledge,” defining it as a habit of inquiry in which knowledge is desired for its “significance, relevance, and worthiness.”⁸ With still more focused attention, Paul Griffiths has explored the subject in his study *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar*, where he notes that although for many today the “appetite for knowledge is an undifferentiated good,” to the “long Christian tradition” it has been regarded as an appetite that needed to be “catechized and disciplined” like any other. Griffiths’s proposal for how it should be disciplined centers on a distinction between the seeking of knowledge for ownership as a private possession and the seeking of knowledge for the sake of what he calls “reflexive intimacy with the gift.”⁹ What is initially noteworthy about these accounts is that they agree on two essential starting points: that knowledge, as such, is a good, but that the seeking of it can be either well or poorly integrated into human life as a whole. Like any other appetite, the desire to know needs to be brought under the measure of some rule.¹⁰

⁶ The phrase is Ronald McArthur’s; see his “Saint Thomas and the Formation of the Catholic Mind,” in *The Ever-Illuminating Wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 123–43.

⁷ Jan Aertsen, “Aquinas and the Human Desire for Knowledge,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (2005): 411–30, at 415; Thomas Hibbs, *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion: Metaphysics and Practice* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 36.

⁸ Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 155.

⁹ Paul J. Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), see esp. 1–18.

¹⁰ Cf. *ST* I–II, q. 63, a. 2: “Cum autem ratio boni consistat in modo, specie et ordine, ut Augustinus dicit in libro de natura boni; sive in numero, pondere et mensura, ut dicitur Sap. XI, oportet quod bonum hominis secundum aliquam regulam consideretur.”

Might the desire for knowledge, however, be capable of providing that measure for itself, that is, of autonomy? Consider St. Jerome's counsel: "Love the knowledge of the Scriptures, and you will not love the vices of the flesh."¹¹ Although St. Jerome's reference to the particular reading material—Sacred Scripture—was surely not accidental, many others have seen in liberal studies themselves a kind of pleasure that is wholly honorable and even morally beneficial in itself, whatever the object of study. The premise lies just beneath the surface in a recent volume by Stanley Fish, who affirms that "sustained inquiry into the truth of a matter . . . improves you" and, without irony, characterizes the task of undergraduate instruction as "to initiate students into the pleasures of an academic life," as though this phrase named an unequivocal good.¹² Another recent investigation of the intellectual virtues valorizes "inquisitiveness" and a "deep and abiding desire for knowledge" as long as the knowledge is being sought for its own sake rather than for worldly gain; on this view, an appetite for knowledge is virtuous if it is "a positive psychological orientation toward epistemic goods."¹³ That such a conception would be prevalent is not surprising; Aquinas, after all, affirmed that "spiritual pleasures, strictly speaking, are in accordance with reason, wherefore they need no control." Yet his analysis did not stop there; he added this crucial qualification: "save accidentally, in so far as one spiritual pleasure is a hindrance to another."¹⁴ Certainly it is well to recall in this context Newman's celebrated affirmation that knowledge by itself does not supply virtue: "Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then you may hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man."¹⁵ The real difficulty here lies in establishing that some forms of intellectual satisfaction are more fitting than others and hence more worthy of pursuit. Roberts and Wood admit that "different moral and metaphysical communities will promote

¹¹ St. Jerome as quoted in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Impugnantes Dei Cultum et Religionem*, III, cap. 4, ad 4.

¹² Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40, 164.

¹³ Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 91, 93, 102. Baehr's earlier formulation should also be noted (p. 19): "A person with the virtue of curiosity, or whose mental life is characterized by wonder, is quick to notice and be inclined to investigate issues or subject matters of significance."

¹⁴ *ST II-II*, q. 141, a. 4, ad 4. Dominican Fathers translation.

¹⁵ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 91. For a further development of the point, see his "Tamworth Reading Room."

different versions” of the virtue they call “the love of knowledge” and seemingly regret to think that rival claims can be assessed “only by a sort of metaphysical adjudication which is in all probability unavailable to human beings.”¹⁶ Griffiths, for his part, enunciates the principle on the basis of which the value of different kinds of knowledge can be weighed, affirming that “a hierarchy in the order of being has an accompanying difference in the order of knowing,” but he does not employ the principle as the basis for his own theory of the virtue of studiousness.¹⁷

Even according to natural reason, an account of the measure of intellectual appetite that does not take our knowledge of God as its ultimate standard cannot be found satisfactory by those who earnestly seek knowledge of the causes of things. For, as Catholic philosophers have recently been reminded by Alasdair MacIntyre, “to be a theist is to understand every particular as . . . pointing towards God” and “to hold that all explanation and understanding that does not refer to God both as first cause and as final end is incomplete.”¹⁸ What is needed is an account of the virtue of studiousness that asks the radical question: with respect to what ultimate measure can the different kinds of knowledge be judged?¹⁹ We need, therefore, nothing less than Aquinas’s own account.

Studiousness, according to Saint Thomas, is a potential part of the virtue of temperance, a secondary virtue, as it were, that enables one to have “a right desire to apply the power of knowing, in this way rather than in another, and to this rather than to that.”²⁰ Although the virtue gains its name, studiousness, from the student’s application to his subject, its nature is clearly on the side of moderation rather than intensification:

¹⁶ Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, 180.

¹⁷ Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite*, 39. As an example of his subsequent analysis, this passage is characteristic (p. 138): “The *cotoneaster adpressus* [a shrub], the Messiaen prelude, the face of the human other, the ensemble of desire and institutional form that constitutes the economic order—all these, if approached as the studious do, yield themselves in part to the intimacy-seeking knower’s gaze.”

¹⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, “On Being a Theistic Philosopher in a Secularized Culture,” *Proceedings of the ACPA* 84 (2011): 23–32, at 23.

¹⁹ For an analysis of studiousness proceeding from the same question, see McInerney, *Thomism in an Age of Renewal*, 124–29; and for an admonition about the importance of asking radical questions about rival conceptions of the virtues, see David Solomon, “Virtue Ethics: Radical or Routine?” in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 57–80.

²⁰ ST II-II, q. 166, a. 2, ad 2. For another discussion of the virtue, see Gregory Reichberg, “Studiositas, the Virtue of Attention,” in *The Common Things: Essays on Thomism and Education*, ed. Daniel McInerney (Washington, DC: Maritain Association, 1999), 143–52.

“studiousness,” Aquinas explains (ad 3), “consists in restraint, and that is why it is located as a part of temperance.” Now, it is helpful to be told that, like temperance itself, studiousness is a kind of restraint, a bridling of appetite by reason’s rule, but the *content* of that rule is what we are seeking. Augustine’s teaching that “to be curious is prohibited,” provided in the *sed contra* of the same article, suggests that the kinds of moderation effected by studiousness will be revealed through its opposition to the vice of curiosity.

In his discussion of curiosity, Aquinas identifies four ways in which the knowledge of the truth can be immoderately desired (*ST* II–II, q. 167, a. 1). First, when the study of something “less useful” draws one away from “what one is obliged” to study, as, for instance, in the case of a preacher who prefers the poets to the prophets. Second, when one wishes to learn from an illicit teacher, as by divination. Third, when someone “desires to know the truth about creatures without referring it to its due end, that is, to the knowledge of God.” And fourth, when “someone seeks knowledge of the truth beyond the capacity of his own mind,” which, Aquinas points out, is problematic because to do so is to court error. Let us summarize his teaching as a series of positive injunctions: the studious man desires to learn about those things his state in life obliges him to know, from the right teachers, referring his knowledge of created things to God as their principle and end, and, finally, wants most to study subjects he is actually able to understand.

What I would like to do now is to make a fresh start by considering how Aquinas’s prescription speaks to our contemporary needs, indeed to the perennial needs of the search for truth. As studiousness is a part of the virtue of temperance, it will be well to begin by considering the ordination of temperance to other goods. It is, to be sure, essentially ordered to higher spiritual goods, beginning with the virtue of fortitude, but it is also and most evidently productive of the well-being of the body, whose passions it rectifies. The bodily good that we chiefly expect from temperance is health, together with its companions, beauty and strength (making provision, of course, for the different seasons of our lives). Something analogous would seem to obtain for studiousness. The mind whose desire for knowledge is rightly ordered ought, all things being equal, to be strong, beautiful, and healthy. Is it too much to suppose, then, that we might consider the virtue of studiousness to be ordered to the flourishing of those characteristics that make the mind strong, beautiful, and healthy, that is, to the intellectual virtues? I propose in what follows briefly to consider each intellectual virtue in turn from the perspective of its relationship to intellectual appetite, by attempting to say something

about the type of restraint it requires, the excellence to which this restraint conduces, and the practices by which it is cultivated.

The Path to Wisdom

The injunction that the student should most desire to study what he is capable of understanding seems unambiguously to point to Aquinas's account of the order of learning and thus to the need to acquire the liberal arts and speculative sciences as permanent habits of mind and to acquire them in the proper order.²¹ The injunction, after all, cannot mean that we are meant to remain in whatever intellectual condition we find ourselves, for, as Newman once memorably said, "it is impossible to stop the growth of a mind."²² Indeed any desire to study is a desire to improve, as even a desire to gain a better and more enduring hold upon what one already knows is itself a kind of improvement. Our appetite for knowledge, therefore, must be ruled by a standard that permits and directs its growth, which is just what is promised by the order of learning, the "path which leads to wisdom."²³ That order takes its form from its end, an end of which Aquinas offered this plain account: "it seems obvious that the end of any intellectual substance, even the lowest, is to understand God."²⁴ So, it seems that the restraint we need is not one that keeps us from climbing to the heights of that consideration, but that keeps us from doing so precipitously.²⁵ Just as the hiker ought to prepare to climb

²¹ The essential texts from Aquinas's commentaries on the *Book of Causes* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* are conveniently printed as an appendix to Thomas Aquinas, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences*, 4th edition, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986), 99–102. For a recent commentary, see Leo Elders, S.V.D., "St. Thomas Aquinas on Education and Instruction," *Nova et Vetera* 7 (2009): 107–24, esp. 115–19.

²² John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert* [1848] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 142.

²³ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), §6. Although John Paul II may not have been intending a reference to the order of learning with this phrase, there are echoes of the doctrine elsewhere in the encyclical. See §§4, 56, 60, and 81–85. For a commentary that connects the encyclical to Aquinas's account of the intellectual virtues, see Alasdair MacIntyre, "Philosophy recalled to its Tasks: A Thomistic reading of *Fides et Ratio*," in his *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*, Volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 179–96, at 186–87.

²⁴ StG III, q. 25. For commentary, see Aertsen, "Aquinas and the Human Desire for Knowledge," 416ff.

²⁵ ST II–II, q. 53, a. 3, on the vice of precipitousness, is suggestive. The essential medieval treatment of the necessity that studies be pursued in proper order is Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*, ed. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

Mount Adams—the most rugged of the White Mountains—through a course of conditioning on lower peaks, so also the student ought not attempt to ascend to the consideration of God before taking care to strengthen his mind with the appropriate preliminary work.²⁶ The overzealous hiker runs the risk of bodily injury, the presumptuous student of a mental one.

The first fruit of a desire to know that has been restrained in this way is a proper docility.²⁷ Just as the teacher's task is to help the student to follow the natural order of learning by pointing out the right subjects of study in the right order, so the student's is to gain the ability to distinguish between—in MacIntyre's formulation—"what is good and best for me with my particular level of training and learning in my particular circumstances to do, and what is good and best unqualifiedly."²⁸ Another early fruit of keeping oneself to the proper order of studies is the not inconsiderable benefit that is the sort of universal ability to judge learned discourses in terms of their method that Aristotle calls *paideia* and that Newman so effectively lauds in his *Idea of a University*.²⁹ But first and more essentially, the kind of moderated desire that is involved in willingly submitting to the order of learning enables one to make good one's intellectual ground before passing on to a higher one, that is, to know the difference between what one knows and what one does not know about each subject that one is studying. The alternative is not a happy one, and has been aptly captured by Monsignor Robert Sokolowski's description of the "accidental mind." "Sheer ignorance," he writes, "is not a problem; when we are just ignorant of an issue that is raised, we know that we do not know. What is dangerous and misleading is the unselfconscious confusion of accidentals and essentials. Confused persons don't know that they don't know, but they use the names and the words associated with the things they are talking about, and so they seem to know or at least think they know what the things are."³⁰ The way to avoid this kind of

²⁶ For a full discussion of the subject, see Michael Augros, "The Place of Metaphysics in the Order of Learning," *The Aquinas Review* 14 (2007): 23–61.

²⁷ Cf. *ST* II–II, q. 49, a. 3, ad 1: "docilitas utilis sit ad quamlibet virtutem intellectualem."

²⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 61–2.

²⁹ On which see Marie I. George, "The Notion of *Paideia* in Aristotle's *De Partibus Animalium*," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1993): 299–319, and MacIntyre, "The Very Idea of a University: Aristotle, Newman, and Us," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 57 (2009): 347–62.

³⁰ Robert Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 104.

mental confusion is by the careful training of the mind for the task of knowing, a training that involves all of the liberal arts, but among them, chiefly logic.³¹

The obstacle to gaining habitual rectitude of intellectual appetite with respect to the order of learning is that to do so seems so unappetizing. What bright university student will take freshman composition and an introductory logic class when given the chance to skip them in favor of more advanced courses, with their flashy names and interesting reading lists? How many professors are eager not only to teach the liberal arts but to help students to see that they bring desirable perfections of mind? But alas, the Pythagorean Theorem, the ablative absolute, and Barbara-Celarent are what they were many centuries ago. And so it has long been known that the tasks of teaching the liberal arts, for practical purposes, stand athwart progress in “knowledge-making.” When the elective system of higher education was first proposed in the 1880s by Harvard’s President Charles William Eliot, he argued that the custom of giving honors and prizes for scholarship was solely for the sake of promoting “specialization of work” and “advanced instruction.” “It is unnecessary to point out,” he said, “how absolutely opposed to such a policy the uniform prescription of a considerable body of elementary studies must be.”³² We are reaping the fruit of the seeds sown by Eliot. It is difficult to disagree with the lament recently penned by Columbia’s Mark Taylor: “too many courses represent what the professor wants to teach rather than what students need to learn.”³³

As an initial response to Brad Gregory’s charges of papal suspicion and Thomistic timidity in the face of knowledge-making, we may say, with Aquinas, that it seems reasonable to hold that one manifestation of the virtue of studiousness would be a reluctance to be satisfied with the kind of inadequate preparation of students for higher studies that an emphasis on knowledge-making seems almost always to bring in its train. In the face of the cultural authority of the Berlin-style research university, to argue in favor of the liberal arts and the traditional order of the speculative disciplines may seem Quixotic. No less a committed Thomist than

³¹ For a recent reaffirmation of this point, see Benedict M. Ashley, O.P., *The Way toward Wisdom: An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 434–39, and especially 437.

³² Charles W. Eliot, “Liberty in Education,” [1885] in *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, eds. Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith, 2 volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 713.

³³ Mark C. Taylor, *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 115.

Alasdair MacIntyre has said that Aquinas's conception of an ordered education "was and remained a Utopian proposal."³⁴ In the face of such a challenge, Thomists can take consolation in the continuing influence of Blessed John Henry Newman, who was both the product and an eloquent proponent of just the sort of serious liberal education that the virtue of studiousness would seem to require. Although not a Thomist by training, Newman famously attested that he felt "no temptation at all to break in pieces the great legacy of thought" handed down in "the form of a science, with a method and a phraseology of its own," explicitly mentioning Aquinas as one who had given the tradition its shape.³⁵ Newman's own allegiance to Aristotle and his spirited prescriptions of "elementary studies" and "discipline of mind" are well-known, and even if they are more often honored in the breach than in the observance, his status as unofficial patron of higher learning has been affirmed by Pope Benedict XVI, and so one may perhaps be pardoned for hoping that his years of greatest influence may lie in the future.³⁶

Attentiveness

It is admittedly something of an intuitive leap to see the virtue of understanding as the fruit of a suitably restrained desire to learn from the right sources and in such a way that one's learning readily refers to God as first principle and final end. It may, however, help to consider how a certain Promethean attitude coexisted with the denial of finality in the canonical founding texts of the modern mind. This is infamously the case in the works of Descartes, where we find the hope for freedom from "the infirmity of old age"—a Faustian bargain in the making if ever there was one—closely yoked to a round condemnation of the search for final causes.³⁷

³⁴ MacIntyre, "Aquinas's Critique of Education: Against His Own Age, Against Ours," in *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (London: Routledge, 1998), 95–108, at 103. But for an alternative perspective, see Reinhard Hütter, "God, the University, and the Missing Link—Wisdom: Reflections on Two Untimely Books," *The Thomist* 73 (2009): 241–77, at 276–77.

³⁵ John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. Ian Ker (London: Penguin, 1994), 224–25. And for commentary, see Reinhard Hütter, "Catholic Theology in America: Quo Vadis?," *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition 9 (2011): 539–47.

³⁶ See Joshua P. Hochschild, "The Re-Imagined Aristotelianism of John Henry Newman," *Modern Age* 45 (2003): 333–42; Christopher Blum, "Newman's Collegiate Ideal," *Pro Ecclesia* 17 (2008): 310–25; and Benedict XVI's Homily at the Mass with the Beatification of Venerable Cardinal John Henry Newman, 19 September 2010.

³⁷ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, VI (AT 62), and *Principles of Philosophy*, I.28 (AT 15–16), in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert

And Machiavelli was no less explicit: we are to dismiss inquiry into “what should be done” and turn away from “imagined republics” in order that we might instead learn from the Centaur how to “use the beast and the man.”³⁸ But it was indeed a general trend, as technical advances were eagerly sought from such then-dubious sources as alchemical experimentation, the sketching of live nude models, and the dissection of corpses, while zeal for philosophical contemplation waned. Since it is not in artifacts but in the works of the divine art that we chiefly encounter a goodness and intelligibility that leads us to seek their source in God, it seems unsurprising that the modern tendency to frame the intellectual life in terms of our inquiry into the various human arts would be connected to a loss of attentiveness to being and essence.

It is precisely in such an attentiveness that I suggest we can see a second element of the virtue of studiousness, which is the kind of restraint that bears fruit in the disciplining of the interior senses for the task of knowing.³⁹ To consider some differences between the study of nature and the study of artifacts may enable us to appreciate this restraint. In the first place, artifacts are potentially limitless and reliably novel—there is an improved Ford Mustang with every new model year—whereas the works of nature are limited and, for the most part, the same today as they were in the days of Aristotle. This potential limitlessness of artifacts seems to go together with an undirected or promiscuous fascination about them: there is always another new movie, another type of experimental painting or photography, a new direction in nouvelle cuisine. In the study of nature, by contrast, one generally encounters the order of the universe as a limit. There are, to be sure, still thousands of new beetles for us to find in the rainforest. But the number of kinds of birds native to North America has long been well known, and it is a relatively small number. Nature, moreover, loves to hide, whereas it is the characteristic of works of art to declare themselves. Even Rothko’s bland canvasses make a statement. The student of nature, then, finds that his subject matter inculcates a knowledge of and respect for limits, and perhaps even a kind of natural docility and calm. It seems possible to affirm, then, that the task of knowing the being and form of natural

Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), I:143, 202.

³⁸ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield, 2d edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 61, 69.

³⁹ Cf. *ST* I–II, q. 50, a. 3, ad 3: “in ipsis interioribus viribus sensitivis apprehensivis possint poni aliqui habitus, secundum quos homo fit bene memorativus vel cogitativus vel imaginativus.”

things requires a kind of looking into that makes it especially conducive to attentiveness.⁴⁰

The excellence that attentiveness promises is an ability to say something determinate about the natures of things. Again, Sokolowski can help us appreciate the importance of such an ability by an illustration of its opposite, a mental trait he calls “vagueness.” “It is hard to imagine anyone with any intelligence,” he begins, who could be “entirely devoid of insight into what trees are.” But, he continues, “it is much easier to imagine that people use words like democracy, politics, freedom, and happiness, or even atom or electricity, in a vague way. The phenomenon often occurs when academics pretend to know something about quantum mechanics or Gödel’s Theorem.” In cases such as these, he explains, it is the “content” as well as the “form of our speech” that is “inadequate.” When we are struck dumb with vagueness, he explains, it is an indication that “we do not possess the *eidos* of the thing in question.”⁴¹ But where does this vagueness come from? If the understanding of the first principles is “from nature,” as Aquinas teaches (*ST* I–II, q. 51, a. 1 sc), how could we come to lose or damage it except by damaging our nature? There is, of course, a partial answer ready to hand in the distinction between principles known to all and those known only to the wise, a distinction that would enable us to address an example such as electricity with relative ease. But what of more universal principles, or, even the first of them all? The majesty of the fourth book of the *Metaphysics* must not be allowed to confuse us: Aristotle really did encounter sophists who not only denied the principle of contradiction but framed arguments in support of their denial. Theirs was a failure chiefly in the will, but there is also room for an analysis in terms of the loss or occlusion of the habit of understanding that has been provided by Aquinas: “when man ceases to make use of his intellectual habits, strange fancies, sometimes in opposition to them, arise in his imagination, so that unless those fancies be, as it were, cut off or kept back by frequent use of his intellectual habits, man becomes less fit to judge aright, and sometimes is even wholly disposed to the contrary.”⁴²

The obstacles that pull us away from the use of our understanding and insert “strange fancies” into our minds are legion. Consider Cardinal Ratzinger’s contention that the increase in drug abuse in the West was a “warning signal” that revealed a “vacuum in our society,” and an “inte-

⁴⁰ For further discussion, see Christopher Blum, “On the Recovery of Experience and the Search for a Christian Environmentalism,” *Nova et Vetera* 10 (2012): 95–104.

⁴¹ Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, 149–50.

⁴² *ST* I–II, q. 53, a. 3.

rior longing in man which breaks out in perverted form if it does not find its true satisfaction.”⁴³ Or again, Reinhard Hütter’s observation of the connection between the consumption of pornography and the vice of *acedia*.⁴⁴ These examples are the most extraordinary *reductiones ad absurdum* of the replacement of nature with artifact as the focus of our sensory and mental attention, but examples of lesser severity would be easy enough to multiply. The net result, however, is that it is now possible to speak not only of addictions and social pathologies that most evidently and directly corrupt and distort the mind, but also of a new defect that has been labeled “nature deficit disorder,” a defect that arises when names like “Pickachu, Metapod, and Wigglytuff,” the names of characters from Pokémon, become more familiar to children than otter, beetle, and oak tree.⁴⁵

What needs to be done to help those who have lost or damaged their native attraction to the understated loveliness and intelligibility of nature, as the Holy Father has counseled in a different but parallel context, is for “the windows [to] be flung open again” so that they can “see the wide world, the sky and the earth once more.”⁴⁶ And they must be helped to cultivate the practices that keep us from vagueness and that form our interior senses that they might serve rather than obstruct the understanding. These practices involve the use of the senses, but are essentially the work of the mind, for they are practices of looking and listening, of comparing things, of weighing characteristics with careful speech, and, especially, of looking before and after in order to place things in their appropriate genera and species and patiently discussing the natures of things and their definitions with our fellow inquirers. Although initially arduous, these practices not only bear lasting fruit, they also inculcate an habitual attentiveness that is a real perfection of the will and greatly prized by those who have learned to appreciate it. Gilbert Highet’s praise, in his *Art of Teaching*, for Louis Agassiz’s pedagogical method is one instance, but others can be readily supplied from our own experiences of sound and demanding courses of instruction.⁴⁷ Among the many contemporary pleas for the cultivation of attentiveness, few have been as

⁴³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Consumer Materialism and Christian Hope,” in *Teachers of the Faith: Speeches and Lectures by Catholic Bishops*, ed. Tom Horwood (London: Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, 2002), 78–94, at 81.

⁴⁴ Reinhard Hütter, “Pornography and *Acedia*,” *Nova et Vetera* 10 (2012): 901–7.

⁴⁵ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (New York: Workman, 2005), 33.

⁴⁶ Benedict XVI, “The Listening Heart: Reflections on the Foundations of Law,” an address delivered in the Reichstag Building, Berlin, 22 September 2011.

⁴⁷ See Gilbert Highet, *The Art of Teaching* (New York: Vintage, 1955), 214–17.

eloquent as the one penned by the late historian of psychology Edward Reed: "Surely it is time," he observed, to "relearn the homely lesson that all understanding . . . is rooted in ordinary experience. The meaning of our lives will be found only when we make the effort to look for ourselves."⁴⁸ Perhaps, in this regard, it may be said that one of the aspects of Aristotle that still awaits recovery by Thomists is the attentiveness to being that is praised in the famous passage (1.5) in the *Parts of Animals* and embodied throughout his biological corpus.⁴⁹

Bearers of Wisdom

It is in Aquinas's first cause of restraint in the desire for knowledge that I would locate an important teaching about the intellectual virtue of wisdom, that is, in the injunction that the student attend to the matters his state in life requires him to know. I see two lessons implied by this injunction: first, that we ought to desire to climb to the heights of acquired wisdom just in so far as our state in life affords us a fitting opportunity to do so—no more and no less; second, that to whatever extent we have acquired wisdom, so also ought we to desire to share that wisdom by, as it were, coming back down from the heights, in order to make straight and smooth and as wide as possible the path that leads back to them. This twofold restraint is, on the one hand, a holding back from using our leisure to learn about trivial things and thus be distracted from the pursuit of wisdom, and, on the other, a refraining from a selfish enjoyment of whatever wisdom we have acquired thanks to a willingness—even a positive desire—to return to those elementary studies and lower disciplines that enabled us to climb wisdom's slopes in the first place.⁵⁰ For it is a home truth that there will not be wisdom where there is not already considerable science and understanding. The ordering to which the wise are called, on this view, involves a continual climbing up and returning back in order to assist others with their ascent.

It is a happy irony to be able to call upon a sophist to argue the point at hand. The late Richard Rorty, although no friend to wisdom, wonder, or truth, was as well acquainted with contemporary academic life as any. He once testified to his hope that "the students can be distracted from their struggle to get into a high-paying profession, and that the professors

⁴⁸ Edward S. Reed, *The Necessity of Experience* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 163.

⁴⁹ For a parallel suggestion, see Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "Truth and Happiness," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 67 (1993): 1–20, at 14–15.

⁵⁰ For an analogous discussion of the teacher's role, see Marcus R. Berquist, "Learning and Discipleship," *The Aquinas Review* 6 (1999): 1–51.

will not *simply* try to reproduce themselves by preparing the students to enter graduate study in their own disciplines.”⁵¹ His comment accurately points out the habits that are opposed to the studiousness that conduces to wisdom: the bad habit of the student who fails to gird his loins for the ascent (and such a student may very well be a teacher by profession), and the still worse habit of the teacher who has lost sight of his proper task and its true ordination to the common good. The first vice is easy to understand, widespread, and as old as Meno and Thrasymachus; its prevalence explains why some theories of intellectual virtue are content to affirm a strong desire for “epistemic goods” as a sufficient account of a healthy mental life: at least there *is* a mental life in such a case. The second vice is one that we tradesmen best understand, for we see it in ourselves in our weaker moments. A long life in the cabinetmaker’s shop tends to make the back hunched and the eyes see every tree as only a bed or a dresser waiting to happen, and something similar happens to us scholars. We need not look abroad to understand the force of MacIntyre’s observation that “there has developed since [Hume] a kind of philosophy that sometimes functions for those who engage in it just as dining and backgammon did for Hume.”⁵² One may be confident that we all enjoy philosophy more than backgammon; the question is whether we enjoy it selfishly or generously. MacIntyre himself has provided a suitable statement of the criterion by which we may judge our own habit of desiring philosophical knowledge. “Being a great philosopher,” he suggests, “is not at all the same thing as leading an exemplary philosophical life, but perhaps the point of doing philosophy is to enable people to lead, so far as it is within their power, philosophical lives.”⁵³

In pursuit of the call to be truly studious by ardently desiring to fulfill the injunction *sapientis est ordinare* in all of its amplitude, we have been given an exemplar and guide in Benedict XVI. He developed a beautiful teaching about a virtue he calls intellectual charity. By this phrase he did not mean that every text ought to be read with the same sympathy and docility that we give to the works of the Fathers of the Church. Nor did

⁵¹ Richard Rorty, “Education as Socialization and as Individualization,” [1989] in his *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), 116. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, “Catholic Universities: Dangers, Hopes, Choices,” in *Higher Learning and Catholic Traditions*, ed. Robert E. Sullivan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 1–21, at 6: “The undergraduate major . . . becomes increasingly no more than a prologue to graduate school, even for those who will never go to graduate school.”

⁵² MacIntyre, “The Ends of Life, The Ends of Philosophical Writing,” in his *The Tasks of Philosophy*, 125–42, at 132.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 132.

he mean that we ought not argue, and strenuously if need be, for the truth of the faith. Quite the contrary. “This aspect of charity,” he explained, “calls the educator to recognize that the profound responsibility to lead the young to truth is nothing less than an act of love.” In practice, he noted, the work of this virtue is to “uphold the essential unity of knowledge against the fragmentation which ensues when reason is detached from the pursuit of truth” and “guide the young towards the deep satisfaction of exercising freedom in relation to truth.”⁵⁴ Perhaps it is because he stood to the whole world as an elder that he understood his own Petrine ministry as an exercise of intellectual charity, making his own the “task to safeguard sensibility to the truth; to invite reason to set out ever anew in search of what is true and good, in search of God.”⁵⁵ And he fulfilled that task with a most generous labor of teaching, whose beneficiaries we all are.

To the extent to which we are narrowly immersed in a research agenda, have allowed our minds to be shaped by human conventions rather than to be measured by the being of things created by God, and finally, have not labored in the elementary studies that students must master if they are to make genuine progress in knowing and toward wisdom, to that same degree will we be unlikely to perceive in Aquinas’s conception of studiousness a wise restraint by which the desire for knowledge is ordered to the attainment of the intellectual virtues. Instead, the practices that characterize studiousness may well seem to us as so much timidity in the face of knowledge-making. Those “bearers of wisdom” who have tasted something of the fruitfulness of restraint, however, are not likely to agree.⁵⁶ N V

⁵⁴ Benedict XVI, Address to Educators, Washington, DC, 17 April 2008. See also the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, §§1–6 (2009), his Homily for First Vespers with University Students of Rome, 17 December 2009, and “Saint Augustine of Hippo (4),” General Audience Address of 20 February 2008.

⁵⁵ Benedict XVI, Address at La Sapienza, the University of Rome, 17 January 2008.

⁵⁶ Benedict XVI, Address to Catholic Educators, Washington, DC, 17 April 2008.