

Creation, Human Dignity, and the Virtues of Acknowledged Dependence

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I. Introduction

WHAT ROLE do relations of dependence have in determining how we should think about ourselves and our flourishing as human beings and creatures of God? In *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*,¹ Alasdair MacIntyre argues that moral and political philosophy have failed to recognize what he calls the “virtues of acknowledged dependence,” a failure that results in a distorted account of human flourishing. A more adequate conception of human flourishing requires greater reflection upon human life as the embodied life of an animal, immersed in relations of interdependence among fellow members of the human species. MacIntyre suggests that his earlier work in *After Virtue* suffered from the inadequacies in moral and political philosophy that he would now criticize, as he attempted a renewal of Aristotelian conceptions of virtue without Aristotle’s “metaphysical biology.” In this essay I begin with MacIntyre’s reflections in order to consider the resources in St. Thomas Aquinas for a more adequate conception of the “virtues of acknowledged dependence” among human beings, particularly themes in St. Thomas that

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

concern our embodied rational, social, and political nature. I clarify an ambiguity in what appears to be MacIntyre's concession to "metaphysical biology," and argue that he is not calling for a revival of metaphysics as an aid to moral and political reflection upon human flourishing. But having made that clarification, I then raise the question of metaphysics that MacIntyre does not. I suggest that MacIntyre's new reflections still stop short of a full-blown philosophical discussion of human dependence and its importance for human flourishing. With that limitation in mind, I turn to Josef Pieper's reflections upon St. Thomas's metaphysics of creation, and ask what such a metaphysics might contribute toward a better understanding of human dignity, freedom, and the virtues of acknowledged dependence.

II. The Virtues of Acknowledged Dependence

In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre argues that moral theory must recognize what he calls the "virtues of acknowledged dependence." Too often moral theory is engaged in from the perspective of "those who take themselves to be self-sufficiently superior" and autonomous agents. The autonomous moral theorizer stands in splendid isolation, speculating about his obligations to "others." These faceless "others" stand in various natural relations of dependence upon him, yet he wonders whether that fact has any value, and how it may give rise to any obligations he may have toward them. But MacIntyre's "virtues of acknowledged dependence" are not to be found in the objects of the autonomous and self-sufficient moral philosopher's possible beneficence. He is not suggesting that those who depend upon the moral philosopher should virtuously acknowledge their dependence upon him. On the contrary, he is suggesting that the moral philosopher himself has failed to acknowledge, and thus virtuously develop toward perfection his dependence upon other human beings.

MacIntyre is trying to overcome the asymmetrical moral black hole engendered by the notions of autonomy and heteronomy, by focusing upon our intrinsic interdependence. Of particular importance are the virtues that he identifies as the virtues of giving and receiving, which are not adequately captured in traditional Aristotelian discussions of the virtues of justice and generosity. "Since

according to most understandings of the virtues one can be generous without being just and just without being generous, while the central virtue required to sustain this kind of receiving and giving has aspects of both generosity and justice.”² He mentions by contrast the Lakota virtue of “Wancantognaka” which “names a generosity that I owe to all those others who also owe it to me. Because I owe it, to fail to exhibit it is to fail in respect of justice; because what I owe is uncalculating giving, to fail to exhibit it is also to fail in respect of generosity.”³ And yet MacIntyre finds a parallel for the Lakota discussion in St. Thomas’s discussion of liberality, where in one and the same act, one may exhibit the virtues of justice, *misericordia*, *beneficentia*, *decentia*, and charity. “What the virtues require from us are characteristically types of action that are at once just, generous, beneficent, and done from pity. The education of dispositions to perform just this type of act is what is needed to sustain relationships of uncalculated giving and graceful receiving.”⁴

These virtues find their most striking application in the care we extend toward those among us who suffer from some disability, particularly the most extreme disabilities associated with “human beings who do not or no longer achieve the status of Lockean persons, human beings whose potentialities for rationality or affective response have been permanently frustrated.”⁵ According to MacIntyre our flourishing develops and we receive a good from these persons in our care. But he anticipates the objections. How can we be dependent upon them for our good, if they are no longer capable of voluntary action? How can they teach us, when our “relationship to them must be one-sided?” They must be little more than passive recipients of our benevolence, and the crucial question is when has the burden and cost of such care gone beyond what is reasonable for the exercise of our one-sided benevolence. But MacIntyre responds to the objections, “what they give us is the possibility of learning something essential, what it is for someone else to be wholly entrusted to our care, so that we are answerable

² *Dependent Rational Animals*, 120.

³ *Ibid.*, 118–19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

for their well being.” And lest he be accused of trading in a generality, MacIntyre proceeds to specify a number of very particular and sometimes “messy” ways in which this general response is carried out particularly by those among us who have the responsibility of caring for these persons.⁶

The failure to recognize the virtues of acknowledged dependence is rooted in our tendency to conceive of rationality as what *sets us off from*, and *elevates us above* our animal nature, and the bodily dependence that accompanies it. We presume that *rationality* makes us individual autonomous agents with no common good, while our *animality* makes us dependent vulnerable members of a species with a common biological good, but no better than other species of animals in that vulnerability. Since agency is associated with rationality, this bodily dependence can be little more than a biological fact hardly relevant for determining the conditions necessary for being a moral agent—the antinomy of reason and nature. On the contrary, MacIntyre argues that our life of reason is not exempt from this embodied dependence. Since the life of reason is the form of our animality—the *way* we are animals—we cannot understand our rational agency apart from a reflection upon how that rationality is conditioned by the dependencies and vulnerabilities of the living bodies that we are. He writes, “no account of the goods, rules and virtues that are definitive of our moral life can be adequate that does not explain—or at least point us towards an explanation—how that form of life is possible for beings who are biologically constituted as we are, by providing us with an account of our development towards and into that form of life.”⁷ Thus there can be no adequate moral or political theory that fails to acknowledge and incorporate the virtues of acknowledged dependence.

MacIntyre points out that this insight marks a departure from his claim in *After Virtue* that one could provide a revised Aristotelian account of the virtues while at the same time disregarding Aristotle's outmoded “metaphysical biology.” But I think it is important not to misunderstand this departure from *After Virtue*. MacIntyre's point is not to graft metaphysics on top of the physical dependence

⁶ Ibid., 139–40.

⁷ Ibid., “Preface,” x.

he thinks we need to reflect upon. That would just be another form of the antinomy he wants to avoid between nature and reason. As he goes on to characterize it, he is not suggesting a move toward metaphysics. He writes, "I was in error in judging an Ethics independent of biology to be possible."⁸ Ethics must take account of biology in its philosophical reflection. Presumably such reflection will need to be mediated by a better philosophical reflection in general upon the scientific results of biology; we cannot simply read off ethical claims from scientific, and I do not think that MacIntyre is suggesting that we try. Rather, in Aristotelian terms, he is pushing us toward a better understanding of the physical as it is displayed in the life of rational *animals* in pursuit of a common good. This is not a call for metaphysics, but rather a better philosophy of nature that would point us toward a more adequate conception of the physical in which we can recognize how rationality is the form of the animal life we share in common in pursuit of our good.

MacIntyre's move toward this philosophy of nature finds strong support in St. Thomas's reflections upon the place of rationality and the social in our lives as animals. In the first place his emphasis upon the embodied form of rationality finds support in the analysis of rationality in the *Summa*. A large burden of St. Thomas's discussion of human nature in the first part of the *Summa* is to show that rationality is the form that understanding takes in an animal. It is the act of an animal conditioned by the embodied way in which the animal cognitively interacts with its environment. It is because it is an act of an animal that intellect in human beings is discursive and thus rational, from which it follows that neither angels nor a god are rational.⁹

It might be objected that according to St. Thomas reason "distinguishes us from animals" because he argues that it is not the act of any bodily organ. But this misunderstands the argument. It is certainly true that he argues that the act of reason is not the actuality of any particular bodily organ. But for him it does not follow that it is not the act of an animal. On the contrary, the whole point of the discussion is to conclude that it *is* the act of an animal, which

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 85, a. 3; q. 85., a. 4; and particularly q. 85, a. 5.

is why in the Aristotelian classificatory scheme it can function as the specific difference that determines the genus animal to the species human. It distinguishes human beings *as* animals, not *from* animals.¹⁰

In the second place, there are a number of themes in St. Thomas that provide a social and political, as well as a physical setting for MacIntyre's insight. The first has to do with the necessity for spoken language. St. Thomas writes in his commentary on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* that counterfactually if a man were a naturally solitary animal, his own cognitive engagement with the world would suffice for him, and there would be no need of language. But "since a man is naturally a political and social animal, it was necessary that the conceptions of one man should be made known to another, which is accomplished through spoken language; and so it was necessary that there should be spoken language in order that men might live among one another."¹¹ The key is the recognition of man's animality, the form it takes, that it is not solitary but intrinsically social and political. We must make known to one another what each of us has come to understand. St. Thomas adds that writing as a form of language makes it easier for this social necessity to proceed on through history, clearly partially constitutive of a tradition.

Suppose we turn then to what St. Thomas writes about language in his commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima*, where one might think that rationality is conceived along individualist lines because of the concentration upon the powers of the individual soul. St. Thomas, however, writes that in human beings "nature uses air that has been breathed in for the formation of articulated sounds, which is for the sake of a more perfect existence."¹² Earlier in this discussion he mentioned eating with the tongue and the dissipation of body heat through respiration as necessary activities for the mere conservation of the being of animals. These bodily

¹⁰ Cf. *ST* 1, q. 75 *passim*. See my discussion of this theme in "Aquinas's Rejection of Mind, contra Kenny," *Thomist* 66 (2002): 15–59.

¹¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Libri Peryermenias* (Roma: Commissio Leonina, 1989): Book 1, lect. 2, no. 12. I have discussed this theme in Aquinas at length in my *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn: Toward a More Perfect Form of Existence*, forthcoming from the University of Notre Dame Press.

¹² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sentencia Libri De Anima* (Roma: Commissio Leonina, 1984): Book 2, lect. 18, no. 473.

acts of the human animal clearly underscore the central point of the later passage, namely, the use of the same tongue and respiration by *rational* animals in order to speak a “more perfect existence.” Even though it is not the act of any particular bodily organ, the distinctively human form of life, *rationality*, finds expression in bodily acts as much as do more basic animal acts like respiration and digestion. The “more perfect existence” referred to here is just the social and political existence made possible by language that is natural to rational animals.

Both of these discussions find their proper context in Aristotle’s *Politics* and St. Thomas’s commentary on it: speech proves that man is more of a political animal than “bees or any other gregarious animal,” “since communication about [the useful and the hurtful, the just and the unjust, good and evil] makes a home and a city. Therefore, a man is by nature a domestic and civil animal,”¹³ and “the city comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life.”¹⁴ We recognize here in the juxtaposition of “bare needs of life” and “continuing in existence for the sake of a good life” that interweaving of animal life and rational life in human beings that MacIntyre analyzes, and that we saw in the *De Anima* discussion of eating, respiration, and speech. The city is as necessary for the bare needs of life as it is for the rational life that determines the distinctive character of the human good. But insofar as the city itself is determined by the exercise of moral and political reason within it, the activity of providing for the “bare needs of life” will take on a distinctively human, that is, rational and social form. When we recognize this we recognize our dependence upon one another, and our need to acknowledge it in order to pursue the useful, the just, and the good, and avoid the hurtful, the unjust, and the evil.

The point of this discussion of language in the life of rational animals is not that we can talk about what we all already know, but

¹³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opera Omnia cum hypertextibus in CD-ROM*, ed. Roberto Busa, S.J. (Milan: Editoria Elettronica Editel, 1992): *Expositionem in VIII Lib. Politicorum*, Book 1, lect. 1.

¹⁴ Aristotle’s *Politics*, 1252b28–29, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941). Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositionem in VIII Lib. Politicorum*, Book 1, lect. 1.

rather that we do not yet know what we need to flourish apart from our engagement with one another as social, political *animals*. Our reason is misunderstood apart from its embodiment in the social and political life of the animals we are.

There is a sense in which any animal that engages in sexual reproduction or seeks food in concert with other animals is by nature a social animal. In fact St. Thomas grants that there are other “gregarious animals.” Now in order to stress our commonality with other animals, MacIntyre provides a discussion and argument about the pre-linguistic conceptual capacities of other animals, particularly dolphins, as well as dolphins’ linguistic capacities in the social pursuit of prey and at play, attributing to them “a purposeful pursuit of characteristic goals.”¹⁵ He concludes that it is plausible to attribute to them agency, and the reasons for action that are a necessary condition for agency. However, following St. Thomas, MacIntyre suggests that such attributions are “by analogy”¹⁶ to the human, not strictly speaking the same as the human. Further, the linguistic capacities of other animals are not nearly complex enough to support the kind of reflective activity distinctively characteristic of human life.¹⁷ Still we share with other animals pre-linguistic “reasons for action” that form the basis for the properly human reflective life. So in common with other animals we have reasons to “pursue the useful . . . and avoid the hurtful,” but as *human* animals in our own particular way we can and should recognize, reflect upon, and affirm their relations to “the just, and the good . . . the unjust, and the evil.”

What St. Thomas would stress is that the social character of the human animal goes all the way to the specific difference of human beings from other animals, namely to the specific way in which

¹⁵ *Dependent Rational Animals*, 23. MacIntyre’s discussion is involved, and takes place over a number of chapters. For my purposes here it is not necessary to determine the ultimate success of MacIntyre’s argument about dolphins and other animals. It is only necessary to see on the one hand just how much we share in common with these animals, and how close is the connection we have to other animals in the manner in which our rational lives are played out, and on the other hand how that animal life is specified differently in humans.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54–55.

reason expressed in language gives communicative expression to the form of our animal activities. Once the pack of wolves kills the game, it is dog-eat-dog with respect to who will get the most. Even in species where there is a more common sharing of food, it does not rise to the elaborate forms of preparation involved in human modes of cooking. Such species do not typically have elaborate feasts and ceremonies the purpose of which is not simply to nourish the body, but to play a larger role in a social life informed by reason and reasoned reflection upon what is “useful and hurtful, just and unjust, good and evil.” Thus we can understand the central significance of marriage feasts in human cultures that involve a public rite of union solidified by a public feast woven together by complex relations, both implicit and explicit, of reason, sociability, and custom ordered toward a common good.

However, lest we get carried away in “spiritualizing” the distinctiveness of our rationality in these activities, St. Thomas is emphatic in drawing our attention back to the bodily form that our social life takes, particularly in his discussion of the virtues of truthfulness and friendship. In the discussion of friendship, he is faced with the objection that to treat a stranger as a friend would involve deception and thus act against the virtue of truthfulness. The point of the label “stranger” is that he or she is defined as one outside of one’s social circle. How can one stand in the moral and social position of friend to another so defined without deception, that is, without treating this stranger as other than he or she is? St. Thomas responds on the contrary, “by *nature* every man stands as friend to every other man with a kind of universal love; as *Ecclesiasticus* says, ‘Every animal loves its kind.’ The marks of friendship shown outwardly in word and deed towards strangers or people unknown express this sort of love; thus there is no deceit involved.”¹⁸ Notice that St. Thomas finishes his point in the *Summa Theologiae* by grounding it in a biblical allusion. And yet he need not have done so. Commenting on the discussion of friendship in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, St. Thomas almost repeats verbatim Aristotle’s claim that there is a natural friendship among all human beings, based upon species membership. Aristotle writes, “that is why we praise

¹⁸ ST 2–2, q. 114, a. 1, ad 2.

those who love all human beings [*philanthropos*]. Certainly in one's wanderings one will see that every man is as an acquaintance and friend of every other man."¹⁹ And yet St. Thomas adds a telling personal comment to Aristotle, if we bear in mind that as a mendicant Dominican friar he was required by the rule of his order to walk, not ride, wherever he went, including his trips throughout Europe from Naples to Paris, Cologne, Rome, and so on. Playing on an ambiguity in the term "erroribus" of the Latin text of Aristotle, St. Thomas adds to what Aristotle had said that "this is most clear when the path is uncertain, for everyone calls back even an unknown and foreign stranger from going the wrong way, as if every man is naturally an acquaintance and a friend of every other man."²⁰ And of course the point here can and should be taken metaphorically for every course of human action.

We have already seen that rationality is determined by its embodiment in the life of the human animal. But notice that according to St. Thomas the universal love we owe to all human beings, and which needs to be expressed in "words and deeds," is not grounded in a reflection upon our rationality as such or considered in isolation, but rather in a reflection upon our common animality. And so contrary to the assumption of the objection, and paradoxically, to treat a stranger as a stranger and not a friend is the offense against truthfulness. However much our mutual love is distinguished from other animals by the way it is expressed rationally in "word and deed," it remains grounded in our animal mode of life.

Thus while reason gives determination to the particular social form that our friendships take person by person, the ground of those friendships is not to be found in reason itself, but in our embodied animal existence: Every animal loves its kind. When we seek understanding through discourse, it does not establish our friendship but develops it. This recognition of embodied animal

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. My translation of the Latin text to be found in the Marietti edition of St. Thomas's *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*: see *In Decem Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum Expositio* (Turin: Marietti, 1949): 1155a21–23.

²⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *In Decem Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum Expositio*, Book 8, lect. 1, no. 1541.

dependence as the ground of friendship gives weight to what MacIntyre had to say about one of the most pressing difficulties for moral philosophy—what moral relations do we bear to the cognitively immature and the severely cognitively disabled? From the perspective of “rational” intercourse alone, there can be no question of mutuality and dependence here. Are such beings even persons, or mere human animals?

From the perspective of a friendship grounded in reason as such, the cognitively immature or severely disabled are or have become “strangers to us.” Consider here Aristotle’s poignant reflection upon how distance affects a friendship. “Distance does not dissolve the friendship unconditionally, but only its activity. But if the absence is long, it also seems to cause the friendship to be forgotten; hence the saying, ‘Lack of conversation has dissolved many a friendship.’”²¹ Now of course Aristotle was talking about spatial distance and its effects upon friendship. But consider how the conception of “Lockean persons, human beings whose potentialities for rationality or affective response [are immature] or have been permanently frustrated” can transform Aristotle’s point about spatial distance into one about cognitive distance. Then consider John McDowell’s description of “human infants [who] are mere animals, distinctive only in their potential”²² for developing a capacity to reason, and extend that characterization to the severely cognitively disabled who can no longer exercise that potential. How is it that care for such human beings can be anything other than an act of benevolence toward a purely passive recipient who appears to be no longer the locus of a good appropriate to a rational being, the care of whom, as well as the appropriateness of one’s “benevolence,” has to be evaluated ultimately in terms of a cost-benefit analysis for society?

We saw earlier that in such a situation MacIntyre believes that we learn from these human beings what it is to have entrusted to one the entire good of another. This of course presupposes that in such situations these human beings have a good appropriate to them that is not dependent as such upon a developed or healthy capacity to reason. An account that would ground that good in

²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1157b10–13.

²² John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 123.

reason as such, apart from its embodiment in an animal, cannot, it seems, attribute any good to these human beings in their present immaturity or affliction. If, however, St. Thomas is right about the ground of friendship, friendship even toward the stranger, we can see how these “strangers” continue to have a good that is appropriate to them as human beings. Reason is the capacity of an animal, whether it is in an immature state or suffers from some affliction in its exercise. Contrary to McDowell, there is no such thing as a “mere animal”; a “mere animal” is a vicious abstraction. We can say to this living human animal that as your friend we will help you to develop your capacity to reason. We can say to this other, that as your friends we will do what we can to help you rid yourself of this affliction or pathology, and failing that, as your friends, we will suffer this affliction with you.

We approach the stranger as one sharing with us an embodied animal form of life, before we ever open our mouths to speak with him or her. Except for the recognition of that common embodied form of life, we would never open our mouths; this is one to whom I can and will speak. Nor would we be able to recognize this other one's immaturity, or pathology, except as the immaturity or pathology of this specific kind of animal. So the *other* here and now is a *rational animal*, whether or not this “stranger” fails to exercise the distinctive act of that species through some immaturity or affliction. Failure to see this point is little more than the persistent residue of the antinomy that sees *reason* as what “elevates us above” the nature of a “mere animal.” To be sure, a major theme of McDowell's work is to overcome this very antinomy. Yet he will fail to do so, as long as he approaches human infants as “mere animals.” Indeed, for McDowell the life of reason has little more than a “foothold” in nature.²³ But in light of St. Thomas's response to the objection about the stranger, to treat immature and severely cognitively afflicted human beings as strangers and not friends is an offense against the truth.

Later, discussing friendship as a part of justice, St. Thomas remarks “because man by nature is a social *animal*, in common

²³ See McDowell, 85 and 95. See McDowell's comparisons throughout the book of the “experiences” of animals and the experiences properly so called of those endowed with reason.

decency he owes plain truth to others, since without this human society could not survive.”²⁴ Human society, which is a society of animals, is distinguished from that of other kinds of social animals by the way in which its rational form calls forth the “common decency of plain truth” necessary for this particular society of animals to survive and promote a certain universal love and friendship among its members. Finally, discussing truthfulness versus lying in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Ethics*, St. Thomas comments that truthfulness is to be found in both words and one’s general manner of life, insofar as one’s exterior conduct *in addition* to one’s speech is in conformity with one’s condition or nature.²⁵ Perhaps negatively we can see here one difference between other animals and human friendship, truthfulness, and social life—however much other animals may possess some facets of linguistic capacity, they do not rise to the complexity and interrelationship with social and political life that makes lying possible for them. In that case they cannot possess the virtue of truthfulness. This discussion also confirms the observation that it is just as possible to lie with one’s body generally as it is with those special bodily acts we call the utterance of one’s words. Indeed, to the extent that we cognitively separate our rationality from the embodied form it takes in our animal life, it is to be expected that we will lose sight of this insight; we will begin to conceive of the body as the instrument of human action, rather than the mode of its expression.

These reflections upon St. Thomas provide evidence and support for MacIntyre’s claim that many of the resources necessary for an adequate account of the virtues of acknowledged dependence are to be found in St. Thomas, particularly his extended discussion of the “social virtues” in the second part of the second part of the *Summa Theologiae*.

III. The Metaphysics of Creation

With St. Thomas now in mind, I want push the reflection further and suggest that there is a more fundamental dependence the recognition of which is a necessary condition for a better understanding

²⁴ ST 2–2, q. 114, a. 2, ad 1.

²⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *In Decem Libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum Expositio* (Turin: Marietti, 1949): Book 4, lect. 15, no. 835.

of human flourishing, a metaphysical dependence that goes beyond and is prior to the natural dependence MacIntyre analyzes. What follows is nothing more than a first step in raising the issue. Following the lead of Josef Pieper's analysis of creation as the "silent element in St. Thomas,"²⁶ what does a recognition of God as Creator suggest for our understanding of the virtues of acknowledged dependence?

Pieper shows that in St. Thomas's metaphysics there can be no greater recognition of dependence than what we recognize when we understand ourselves to be creatures of a god. This is not a question of how to properly conceive of the physical so that we can adequately recognize our relations of natural dependence upon one another. It is in the strictest sense a recognition of a metaphysical dependence upon a being with whom we have no *natural* relation. Whether the recognition is rudimentary within our day-to-day lives or highly developed within a metaphysical discourse, if we cannot recognize that we are creatures of a god, we have no hope for pursuing the moral and political implications of such a recognition for our lives. Here it is to the point that Aristotle argues that if we cannot recognize that there is anything other than the physical, then there can be no metaphysics, and first philosophy is simply physics in Aristotle's sense, a philosophy of nature.²⁷ So at the very least, if it is important for our moral and political reflection to recognize our fundamental dependence upon a god as creator, some form of metaphysics beyond the philosophy of nature is necessary for moral and political philosophy, a point that the Holy Father reminded us of in *Fides et Ratio*.

Assuming then that such a metaphysics is possible, notice that St. Thomas's accounts of friendship, trustworthiness, and love, to the extent that they are centered in the natural community we share as animals with other human beings, beg one on to ask what friendship, trust, and love we can bear toward a God who creates us from nothing, and sustains us in our existence, a Creator who rather than being a rational animal causes rational animals to be. From him all is gift, and so we are related to him only by his gift, not ours.

²⁶ Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957).

²⁷ Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 1026a23–33, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

Socrates asked Euthyphro what possible gifts, honor, praise, service, and so on can we give to a god in our efforts to be pious? I confess that I was surprised when I looked at St. Thomas's discussion of piety and found that he argues that piety is only improperly applied and directed to God.²⁸ Instead, St. Thomas tells us that the virtue of "religion pertains to the display of reverence toward the one God for one single reason, namely, because He is the first principle of creation and the providential care of things."²⁹ Because of the difference between one's relations of dependence upon one's human parents and one's Creator, it is necessary to distinguish the natural virtue of piety which is properly owed to one's parents from the natural virtue of religion which is properly directed to those acts by which we worship, praise, honor, serve, and give what is due to God. Why did Euthyphro leave the conversation in disgust to prosecute his father, and Socrates in sadness to face the Athenians and their charge that he did not believe in the gods of Athens? Was it because they had no metaphysics of creation, and could not adequately distinguish between what is owed to one's father and what is owed to one's god?

Creation is a relation that all beings bear to God, and the distinction in St. Thomas between piety and religion as natural virtues makes it evident that we must ask what particular form the relation of creation takes for human beings, and what virtues of acknowledged dependence are appropriate for created rational animals toward their creator. In a remarkable passage from the *De Veritate*, St. Thomas provides a metaphysical analysis of the interplay of created perfections that animates his thought.³⁰ Despite the

²⁸ ST 2-2, q. 101, a. 1.

²⁹ ST 2-2, q. 81, a. 3.

³⁰ Contemplating the "fittingness" of the creation of rational animals, St. Thomas writes that "the total perfection of the universe . . . ascends from the mutual coming together of the perfections of the singular things" within it. Yet that perfection of the created world is incomplete, unless there is some being within it that can unite within itself in some fashion the diverse created perfections of the universe. St. Thomas writes, "this is the perfection of one who knows; and so it is said in *De Anima* that the soul is in a manner all things, because it is born to know all things." And he adds that "according to the philosophers this is the ultimate perfection to which the soul is able to attain, for the whole order of the universe and

manifold yet finite perfections found in creation, creation itself remains imperfect unless it contains an image of the ultimate unity of all perfections in God, namely, a perfection found in the created image and likeness of God, a human being knowing creation. He concludes the analysis by writing that "according to the philosophers this is the ultimate perfection to which the soul is able to attain, for the whole order of the universe and of its causes to be expressed within it, which they held to be the ultimate end of a man, and which according to us will be in the vision of God, since as Gregory says, 'what is it that they may not see who see The One Seeing All Things?'" A root meaning of "nature" (in St. Thomas's Latin "*natura*") is *to be destined by birth toward a goal*.³¹ Thus in the passage it is paired with his construction "*nata est omnia cognoscere*," born or destined to cognize all things; it is this destiny "to which we are born." Notice that St. Thomas grants this insight to the "philosophers," namely, the knowledge of God as first cause and governor of the created universe.³² As a Christian theologian, what St. Thomas will not grant to them, short of the gift of grace, is a recognition of the ultimate supernatural character of that union

of its causes to be expressed within it, which they held to be the ultimate end of man, and which according to us will be in the vision of God, since as Gregory says, 'what is it that they may not see who see The One Seeing All Things?'" (*Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate* II. 2). This is metaphysical speculation indeed, and of the sort unwelcome in philosophy for quite a while now. Even St. Thomas recognizes this in a way by calling it an argument from "fittingness." But is it any more unwelcome than MacIntyre's challenge to the autonomous modern moral philosopher?

³¹ Cf. Roy J. Deferrari, *A Latin English Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas*, (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1986), 678. Also, C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), chapter 2 on "nature", 25.

³² There can be little question that St. Thomas the interpreter grants to Aristotle the recognition that God is the first cause and providential governor of the created universe. Among other places, perhaps the most striking is the final passage of his commentary on the Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "And so this is what Aristotle concludes, that there is one principle of the whole universe, namely the first mover, and first intelligible, and first good, which above he named God, who is blessed for ever and ever. Amen (... *in saecula saeculorum. Amen*)."

It is more controversial that he grants to Aristotle, indeed even Plato, a recognition of God as creative cause of the universe.

with God, that it will be a graced participation in the inner Trinitarian Life of God.³³

Pieper calls this natural movement within us a “hunger” for reality—“so furious is this hunger that it would have to be called desperate if there were no hope of satiation.” And yet, he identifies within us another opposed desire, a desire to deny any such natural movement, or the possibility of its satisfaction, as “the desire not to admit that man as a spiritual being can be ‘needy’ at all,”³⁴ that is, a desire not to acknowledge our dependence upon anyone or anything.

The passage in St. Thomas might tempt us toward the objection that for St. Thomas beatitude is fundamentally individualistic, a one-on-one rational encounter with one’s God, again regardless of our common humanity. On the contrary, reflection once again upon the embodied form of our rationality leads to the opposite claim. There are two initial points to recognize in response. The first point is the importance of St. Thomas’s argument that reason is an immaterial act of an animal. Earlier we considered briefly the objection that the act of reason is immaterial, and therefore it cannot be the act of an animal. In response, we saw that St. Thomas simply rejects the conclusion. The act of reason is immaterial because it is not the actuality of a bodily organ, but it is nonetheless the specific defining act of an animal, the human animal. But for St. Thomas it is because the act of reason is immaterial, that he goes on to argue that the human soul has an immaterial mode of existence that transcends the limits of physical existence, a subsistent mode of existence in which the human body participates through its existential unity with the soul as its substantial form.³⁵

For a discussion of the controversy, as well as a resolution with which I agree wholeheartedly see Mark F. Johnson, “Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?” *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989): 129–55. See also Mark Johnson, “Aquinas’ Changing Evaluation of Plato on Creation,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (1992): 81–88.

³³ See the discussion of the so-called *praeambula fidei* in the first thirteen chapters of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, the first two questions of the *Summa Theologiae*, and the second question of his *Commentary on Boethius’ De Trinitate*.

³⁴ Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998), 64.

³⁵ *ST* 1, q. 75, a. 2; 1, q. 76, a. 1, ad 5.

But that transcendence of the physical is sufficient to meet Aristotle's challenge concerning First Philosophy and the philosophy of nature. No matter how well developed and adequate in itself, no philosophy of nature will be adequate to the task of investigating, much less comprehending, the fullness of human life and flourishing. Metaphysics, that is, a philosophy beyond (*meta*) the philosophy of nature (*physis*) is required. It is important not to misunderstand this point in a dualist fashion.³⁶ The claim is not that the animal life of the human being will be adequately considered in the philosophy of nature, while its rational life can only be considered within metaphysics. On the contrary, I have already argued that the rational life of the human animal will not be adequately considered apart from a more adequate philosophy of nature. Rather, the point is that the whole embodied life of the human animal, while being embedded in the physical, nonetheless transcends it because of the existential unity of the human soul and the human body. Consequently, while an adequate philosophy of nature is necessary for the understanding of human life, so also is an adequate metaphysics indispensable to the understanding of the human animal, not simply the human soul.

The second point to be recognized is that it is this transcending of the limits of the physical by the human animal that St. Thomas is pointing to when he argues that it is necessary for the perfection of the universe that there be within it creatures knowing it and its causes. But this recognition does not go far enough toward adequately understanding human life. A metaphysics of creation is necessary once we recognize that even in this transcendence we are finite and contingent in our being; we are creatures. Adequate metaphysical reflection upon the physical world and upon our transcendence raises the question, asked by both Aristotle and Augustine, whether any finite and contingent being, that is, any creature can constitute the ultimate and final happiness of human life or whether only an infinite and necessary being, that is, a creator can ultimately and perfectly satisfy the longings of the human heart? Placed together with St. Thomas's commitment to man's social and political nature discussed earlier, this metaphysics suggests that our mutual

³⁶ See my "Aquinas's Rejection of Mind, contra Kenny," for an analysis of how reason, the soul, and the body are one in the life of the human animal.

interdependence among ourselves, but also within creation as a whole, is according to the mind and will of our creator; indeed it constitutes our dignity as persons, as St. Thomas writes, “for it is a tremendous dignity to subsist in a rational nature,”³⁷ a nature shared in common with others. God has willed for us what we are, and what we are to become as we await our consummation in the beatific vision of the creator to which we are born.

But Pieper raises the precise question we have for St. Thomas—how are we to conceive of the relation between our destiny in beatitude and the love we are to bear toward our neighbor as it is expressed in our acts of service toward him or her? Are these just arbitrary earthly tasks that God has set us so that we can each achieve our own individual reward in beatitude? Relying upon St. Thomas throughout, Pieper considers the love we bear one another that prompts us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and visit the dying. Is love and friendship simply directed upon meeting these needs of our fellow human beings who are suffering deprivation, and nothing more? No, Pieper responds. “If one is normal, one must wish . . . that there were no reason for one to offer such sustenance. The purpose of these acts lies not within themselves, but in the alleviation of suffering. But what about the concern for the fate of one’s fellows out of which such acts sprang? What about the inner affirmation of the existence of others, which is the essence of love? Are these not meaningful in themselves? Yes and no. No, because love must necessarily aim at something other than itself. But what do I want if I love someone else?” Pieper answers his own question, “I want him to be happy,” and quoting St. Thomas he adds, “in charity, we love others as ‘companions in the sharing of beatitude.’”³⁸ No divinely imposed arbitrary task, but rather mutual assistance in our common life ordered toward *our* destiny toward which we are all by nature born.

Recall what we saw earlier, namely, that it is its embodied form in human life that leads understanding to be distinctively rational in the human species. But it is also this embodied form of reason that leads it to be the understanding of social and political animals. Consequently, reason and sociability are not incidentally or *per*

³⁷ *ST* 1, q. 29, a. 3, ad 2.

³⁸ *Happiness and Contemplation*, 92–93.

accidens related to one another in human life. They are intrinsically or *per se* related. The act of reason is indeed the act of an individual human being; but that does not imply that it is extrinsically related to the social life of the community within which it takes place. Since this intrinsic relation of reason to social life is natural to human beings, a solitary “beatific vision” is as unnatural to human life as the counterfactual condition that we saw St. Thomas consider earlier.³⁹ The beatific vision is, God willing, our vision, not yours or mine. And so we love one another as lifelong companions along the way. “This is most clear when the path is uncertain, for everyone calls back even an unknown and foreign stranger from going the wrong way, as if every man is naturally an acquaintance and a friend of every other man.” The point of this discussion, now embedded in St. Thomas’s metaphysical reflection in the *De Veritate*, is that we cannot separate our common life and love from its ultimate destiny in the love of God. Insofar as human animal life is by nature social and political, our love for one another as “companions in beatitude” shows that on the one hand service to one another, and on the other the vision and adoration of God our creator are *per se* related as a natural activity and its *telos*. Not two lives, but one. Thus, the virtues of acknowledged dependence appropriate to each, God and neighbor, must be recognized as interwoven in a complex fabric of human flourishing.

More generally Pieper, informed by St. Thomas’s metaphysics, raises for us the question of whether we can adequately conceive of the virtues of acknowledged dependence if we do not recognize that they are God’s will for our good that consists in a social life of friendship, trustworthiness, and love as “companions in beatitude.” The

³⁹ It goes beyond the scope of this article to consider the properly theological discussion of the gift of grace necessary for the achievement of the beatific vision. But it is important to point out that, however supernatural a state that is, it is not, according to St. Thomas, unnatural. The point I have been making here is that it does not exclude the supernatural; it excludes the unnatural. This is the point behind the oft-quoted Thomistic phrase, “grace does not destroy nature, it perfects it.” Solitary existence being unnatural to human life, we should not expect that the grace that will perfect human nature in beatitude will bring about that very unnatural existence. Indeed, we expect that it will bring about that graced and perfected social life that traditionally has been called the Church triumphant.

unity of these themes becomes explicit in St. Thomas's transformation of the pagan Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity into a Christian virtue that walks hand-in-hand with humility. Aristotle's great-souled independent individual is troubling to the humility of a Christian, his magnanimous man who "disdains other men," "does not remember kindnesses," and who "cannot associate with others."⁴⁰ To the objection that Aristotle's "magnanimous man *should need nobody*, for dependence is weakness," St. Thomas responds, "this must be understood in a *human* context, which is why [Aristotle] adds *or scarcely anyone*. For it is beyond man to be wholly independent. Every man needs *in the first place* God's help, and in the second place human help, because man is by nature a social animal."⁴¹ The possibility of the independence characteristic of magnanimity only takes place within the more fundamental setting of the social, that is, dependent nature of a human being, in which he is *primarily* dependent upon God, and secondarily other men. So, transforming the characteristics mentioned by Aristotle, St. Thomas writes, "magnanimity makes a man esteem himself worthy of great things through contemplating the gifts which he has received from God."⁴² "Magnanimity thinks little of others in so far as they fall short of God's gifts; for the magnanimous man does not esteem others so greatly as to do any ignoble act on their account," and yet "humility gives honors to others, and reckons them superior in so far as it sees in them some of God's gifts."⁴³ Other human beings *are not* to be esteemed insofar as they draw us away from God, and yet they are to be esteemed insofar as one sees in them God's gifts to us.

Returning to MacIntyre's analysis of the virtues of acknowledged dependence that find their greatest expression in serving those who are in such desperate need that they can return nothing material to one, think of Mother Theresa comforting the dying, because in them she claimed to see the face of Christ. Modern secular analysis may well object that she is selfish and self-absorbed because she does not

⁴⁰ Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 4. Translations from Aristotle as found in *ST* 2-2, q. 129, a. 3 (trans. Anthony Ross, OP and P. G. Walsh [Oxford: Blackfriars, 1966]).

⁴¹ *ST* 2-2, q. 129, a. 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, q. 129, a. 3, ad 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

see others as autonomous individuals existing for their own sake, but claims to see her Savior in them. By contrast, a metaphysics of creation can understand her claim and see in her the face of magnanimous humility; the dignity of human beings consists in their particular mode of participation in the divine. Think of her when St. Thomas continues, “[the magnanimous man] gets no pleasure out of kindnesses from others *unless he makes still greater return to them.*” “He cannot associate with others intimately, *except with his friends . . .* And yet he associates with everyone, great and small, in the degree necessary.”⁴⁴ Thus “his friends” are not simply a small circle of intimates, but “everyone, great and small.” The “degree necessary” is determined by the rational form of life taken by the social animal that man has been created to be. So the good of mature independence within human social and political life can only find its appropriate place within our more fundamental dependence first as creatures upon God, and then as human beings upon one another.

Thus, it is also here that a metaphysics of creation gives specific content and determination to MacIntyre's analysis of the care we extend toward infants and the severely disabled. MacIntyre had said that in the most extreme cases we learn from caring for the severely disabled what it is to have entrusted to one the entire good of another. But what is that good? The current argument over the status of the unborn, infants, and the severely disabled or those near death concerns precisely that question—in the one case have they yet acquired, and in the other have they lost what according to some ought to be identified as the human good? Here the difference between Performance criteria and Endowment criteria of human identity and dignity is crucial.⁴⁵ A performance criterion

⁴⁴ ST 2–2, q. 129, a. 3, ad 5.

⁴⁵ For the contrast between Performance and Endowment accounts of human dignity, see John Kavanaugh, S.J., *Who Counts as Persons: Human Identity and the Ethics of Killing* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 67–70. The difference does not rest solely upon a presumed distinction between Aristotelianism and Lockeanism. Compare Kavanaugh's neo-Aristotelian and Thomistic account with the neo-Aristotelian and Lockean account of Kathleen Wilkes's *Real People: Personal Identity without Thought Experiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). Both recognize the distinction between the endowment and its exercise. But while Kavanaugh judges the exercise to be healthy or pathological by the first-order potentiality of the

will tend to be more restrictive and conservative in attributing the good to those whose present activities meet or approximate some ideal of performance and achievement, and judgments about the good will often times be a difference of degree. An endowment criterion will tend to be more expansive and liberal in attributing

endowment, Wilkes tends to judge the endowment to be healthy or pathological by the second-order potentiality of its exercise. To be fair, in many cases Kavanaugh and Wilkes will agree on what our moral stance should be toward other human beings, particularly as the human beings are more or less close to healthy human beings. The differences show in the extremes. But of course socially it is precisely at the extremes that the debate is presently taking place. While for Kavanaugh it makes no sense to say that being a person may come in degrees, it makes perfect sense to Wilkes. Consequently, for her, calling someone a person really comes down to a semantic and social question (see Wilkes, 56–57). A striking example of the difference at the extremes shows when Wilkes recognizes that we may well have moral responsibilities toward a fetus or embryo “requir[ing] the full application of the stance that we take to persons,” unless the embryo has first been frozen in an IVF procedure, in which case it “has no claim on us at all; there is no stance or attitude that it is proper to take to it” (Wilkes, 72). To thaw or not to thaw, that is the question. The difference also shows up at the other extreme when Wilkes proposes that it might well be appropriate to withhold life saving measures from the “irreversibly senile.” Wilkes imagines a case in which the senile individual may now prefer to continue living, having earlier, while mentally healthy, expressed a desire to die if he ever became irreversibly senile. She opts for the earlier wish of the healthy over the later wish of the sick. The reason given for the appropriateness of withholding such measures is not that they are “heroic” or extraordinary as such for any human being whatsoever. The reason given is Lockean, the “irreversible senility” of the human being. “One could describe this as preferring the wishes of a genuine person to those of a human being who is no longer such. The tragedy, that is, would be seen as the tragedy that has affected a person who has become something less, a tragedy which the person that he was would have wanted us to cut short” (Wilkes, 96). Given the move to the active sense of “cutting short,” and the reasoning behind the position, it is fair to inquire of Wilkes’s position why it began with the passive sense of “withholding treatment.” Might there not be other ways of “cutting short,” consistent with the patient’s healthy wishes, much more efficient and “humane” than simply withholding treatment? Thus, it is materially important that MacIntyre is proposing a Thomistic Aristotelian account, and explicitly distances himself from Neo-Aristotelian accounts like McDowell’s that can appropriately be labeled “Lockean.”

the human good to those who are set upon a course of development by what they are, that is, by what their natural endowments are, and the judgment will be a difference of kind. But a performance criterion presupposes the endowment criterion as more fundamental. Except on an account of human nature and its natural endowments, it is difficult to see how the activities of the young or infirm can be recognized by the performance criterion as either immature or pathological. Immaturity of what? Pathology of what? As MacIntyre emphasizes, such judgments cannot take place against an abstract ideal of rational performance, but must recognize its embodiment in human nature. No doubt judgments of immaturity or pathology take place against the background of some recognition of normal performance. But normal performance of what? And that recognition of normality is itself not static according to some ideal of mature performance not yet attained or already lost, but rather dynamic as it presupposes a deeper recognition of developmental stages in what the being is and ought to become.

Now, I pointed out that on the one hand MacIntyre, with his desire for a more adequate philosophy of nature, stops short of metaphysics. On the other hand, in the context of his general discussion of the social virtues in *St. Thomas* he mentions the crucial role of the infused theological virtue of charity, the divine love of God and of neighbor. But is there something to be said about the human good in between these two poles of a more adequate philosophy of nature and what we understand about charity in *sacra doctrina*? Yes. *St. Thomas's* metaphysics of creation provides a richness and determination to the account of the human good unknown and inaccessible to a mere philosophy of nature, particularly when considering the good of the immature and severely disabled. The good of the immature and the severely disabled that has been entrusted to us consists in the fact that we and they are companions in beatitude. They remain so even when through immaturity or affliction, they are not able to perform or act in the ways characteristic of mature human beings. They are our friends.

Endowed by nature with the capacities for human life, these human beings do not fail to have, or lose their human dignity and its destiny in the absence of the exercise of these capacities. Here and now the paradox of the existence of such human beings among

us, from the earliest stages of our animal life and through the severest of afflictions, consists in the recognition that being a companion in beatitude is also often being a companion in suffering. What the Christian infused with charity knows, beyond and above the metaphysics of creation, is that this is the lesson of Good Friday.

Here I want to register a pastoral qualification to what I have been arguing. It is exceedingly insensitive to suggest that what those among us who have the direct responsibility for caring for the immature and the severely disabled simply need to sustain them is a better philosophy of nature and a more adequate metaphysics of creation. But neither MacIntyre nor I suggest philosophy as substitute pastoral care. Philosophy is a reflective enterprise that helps us as a community to understand the world around us and its Source. And it should be of aid in communal reflection upon how we should structure our lives, our customs, and our laws to promote the care of the immature and disabled against those social, political, legal, and philosophical forces that increasingly marginalize and seek to “compassionately” exterminate the weak among us. But we would do well here to remind ourselves of St. Thomas’s humility before the task, namely, that such knowledge is exceedingly difficult, takes most of a lifetime, and is filled with many errors.⁴⁶ To that extent, in the pastoral setting it may well prove useless, and in its insensitivity harmful. And yet, as St. Thomas reminds us, it is for this reason that we have been given by God the gift of faith and revelation. In the pastoral setting, what those among us charged with this extraordinary responsibility need is strong and sustaining communities of faith.

IV. Creatures of God: Freedom, Autonomy, and Human Dignity

Though rooted in an ancient problem, St. Thomas’s solution to the problem of the magnanimous man is a far cry from the modern autonomous moral theorizer, whose great-souled independence Pierre Manent has called a flight from nature and from nature’s

⁴⁶ St. Thomas’s point here, drawn from *ST* 1, q. 1, a. 1, should not be confined simply to the question about the demonstration of the existence of God and what immediately follows concerning God, but to everything that it is necessary to know for salvation.

God.⁴⁷ With that flight in mind, consider briefly the vexed problems of liberty, autonomy, free will, and the natural law, certainly of pressing importance for adequate moral and political reflection upon human flourishing. In his short but important essay “What is Enlightenment,” Immanuel Kant opens the first line by explaining that “enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere Aude!* ‘Have courage to use your reason!’—that is the motto of enlightenment.”⁴⁸ This majestic vision has to be read against the background of Kant’s general denial of the possibility of a metaphysics in which one could know the existence of a creator god. It follows that one cannot *know* a natural law conceived of as a providential participation in the eternal law of such a creator god. One is left with one’s critical reason to recognize the necessities of the moral law, and with one’s will in an act of autonomous self-legislation to affirm that moral law as one’s own.

But notice that the act of the autonomous will affirming the moral law is subsequent to enlightenment. Reason must first be in a condition where it can recognize the law for itself, before it can be affirmed by the will. “It is so easy not to be of age. If I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet, and so forth, I need not trouble myself. I need not think, if I can only pay.”⁴⁹ Given the illusion of metaphysics, it can only be an illusion that one is under the tutelage of a god; in practice it is simply various social forces that enslave one. So, with a backhanded reference to Plato’s theory of the state in the *Republic*, Kant describes the condition of the greater part of mankind, “after the guardians have first made their domestic cattle dumb and have made sure that these placid crea-

⁴⁷ See Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. Lepain (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁴⁸ Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment,” in *On History*, trans. Lewis White Beck, Robert E. Anchor, and Emil L. Fackenheim (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

tures will not dare take a single step without the harness of the cart to which they are tethered, the guardians then show them the danger which threatens if they try to go alone.”⁵⁰

For reason to receive the moral law from another is for it to be heteronymous, under the yoke of tutelage. The only hope for an enlightened community is that there be some “among the established guardians of the great masses, who, after throwing off the yoke of tutelage from their own shoulders, will disseminate the spirit of the rational appreciation of both their own worth and every man’s vocation for thinking for himself.”⁵¹ Still, Kant remains fearful of social anarchy as a prelude to enlightenment. It is not revolution that is called for, but rather a gradual process of reform brought about by free thought and restricted action, under a prince who can say “argue as much as you will, and about what you will, but obey.” Even so, amidst the need for social conformity and obedience on the road to enlightenment, the individual will is supreme. The primeval act of enlightenment is not the willed act that affirms the moral law following the process of social reform, nor is it the willed act that obeys the enlightened prince up until the moment of affirmation. It is the act of will itself, the “courageous” will that prior to obedience to the prince and prior to the enlightened use of reason must first “throw off the yoke of tutelage.”

Still, nothing could be further from Kant’s mind than that human beings fashion the moral law from nothing. They recognize what they have not made, and in a free act of will affirm it. In denying the possibility of a metaphysics in which one could know a transcendent being responsible for creation and the natural law, his solution was not to provide an alternative metaphysics in which we human beings take the place of God. There are signs, however, that in our own day we have forgotten Kant’s lesson, as we pursue just such a “humane” and “enlightened” metaphysics of self-creation. Suppose we begin with the metaphysics of the Supreme Court reflecting upon autonomy and liberty. “[The] choices central to personal dignity and autonomy are central to the liberty protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. At the heart of [that] liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4.

meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”⁵² Kant would tremble at such a claim.

But suppose for critique of this metaphysics of liberty we turn not to Kant, but to Nietzsche, the Inverted Thomist. In a passage marvelous even by the high standards he normally set, Nietzsche calls the modern philosophers of the free and autonomous will to account for their cowardice. He encourages us to “see through the boorish simplicity of this celebrated (and ‘monstrous’) concept of ‘free will.’” He writes of it, “the desire for ‘freedom of the will’ in the superlative metaphysical sense, which still holds sway, unfortunately, in the minds of the half-educated; the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one’s actions oneself, and to *absolve God* . . . [it] involves nothing less than to be this *causa sui* . . . to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness.”⁵³ Nietzsche saw clearly that in modern thought there is no greater challenge to an autonomous free will and the liberty it craves than the existence of a creator God. Consider Napoleon, of whom Nietzsche writes “like a . . . signpost to the *other* path, Napoleon appeared . . . and in him the problem of the *noble ideal as such* made flesh—one might well ponder *what* kind of problem it is: Napoleon, this synthesis of the sub-human and the superhuman.”⁵⁴ Notice Nietzsche’s positing of Napoleon as the antithesis of Christ, as the “noble ideal as such made flesh,” the Napoleon who captures the pope only to grab the crown from his hands and place it upon his own head. Like Napoleon it is we who by our autonomy will give absolution *to* God—we will not be absolved.

But Nietzsche sees through Napoleon to the paradox. Once we have rid ourselves of God, the answer is not the glory of a free and autonomous will defining for itself its “own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” Nietzsche “begs [us] to carry our ‘enlightenment’ a step further.” Once we have gotten rid of the eternal lawgiver, we must also “put

⁵² Frank D. Wagner, ed., *United States Reports Volume 505: Cases Adjudged in the Supreme Court at October Term, 1991* (Washington: 1996), 851.

⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), 28.

⁵⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 54. Emphasis in original.

out of [our] heads the contrary of this monstrous conception of 'free will': I mean 'unfree will.'"⁵⁵ The death of God is also the death of the antinomy between free and unfree will, autonomy and heteronomy, Holy Roman Emperor and Pope. The enlightened consciousness that Nietzsche is pushing will give up the obsession with freedom and autonomy once it has given up the obsession with God. Thus Nietzsche sees clearly the paradox; freedom and autonomy are inconceivable without God.

If we must do away with God, we must also do away with freedom and autonomy. What, after all, is the concept of freedom falsely trying to capture according to Nietzsche? Power—"The 'unfree will' is mythology; in real life it is only a question of strong and weak wills."⁵⁶ "I am free, 'he' must obey."⁵⁷ Indeed, here Kant falters as well, as by the light of Nietzsche we see the internal tension in his account of enlightenment. First, we have already noted that the primeval act of enlightenment is an individual act of will prior to reason, a will that must have the power to throw off its "yoke." But what ultimately legitimates the social order brought about by the enlightened ruler, the social order in which the citizens are to become enlightened? Kant's fear of revolution and anarchy is premised upon a still unenlightened populace. Until they have come to be of one mind with their enlightened prince, what is their lot? Just pages after Kant had praised the enlightened ruler who can say, "argue as much as you will, and about what you will, but obey!," he finishes his essay with the chilling qualification, "only one who . . . has a *numerous and well-disciplined army* to assure public peace, can say: "Argue as much as you will, and about what you will, only obey!"⁵⁸ Nietzsche's penetrating vision rephrases it, "I (the prince) am free, he (the citizen) must obey." In the end, for the unenlightened herd enlightenment does not come under a yoke but at the point of a gun.

Now what could be more of a challenge to that power that Nietzsche sees at the heart of "I am free, he must obey," than that it exists as a creature participating in the power of a creator god.

⁵⁵ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁸ "What is Enlightenment," 10.

This Nietzschean paradox should not startle us. It is simply the inversion of the metaphysical paradox in St. Thomas's discussions of how God acts in nature by creation, and in particular in human agency in such a way that He gives to human beings the natural law as their participation in eternal law, and yet as St. Thomas constantly repeats "without prejudice to free will." According to St. Thomas God creates our free will and actions to be precisely that—free. He writes, "God is the first moving cause of both natural causes and voluntary agents. And just as his moving natural causes does not prevent their acts from being natural, so also his moving voluntary agents does not prevent them from acting voluntarily, but rather makes it to be just that, for he works in each according to its nature."⁵⁹ Of free choice he writes, "because the very act of free choice has its origin in God as a cause, it is necessary that whatever happens by free choice falls under divine providence."⁶⁰ We are free and autonomous precisely because of how our natures participate as creatures in the eternal law of God.

The problem is that most of us experience power as an external limit that impedes or disables the impetus we feel toward our conception of the good and happiness. A task of a metaphysics of creation is to help us apprehend a creative power that internally enables us to follow our natural impetus toward our good and happiness, a good and happiness that is itself conceived differently than it otherwise would be without that apprehension. God is at once the lawgiver acting externally to create our voluntary and free natures, and the creator acting internally through those voluntary and free natures. His yoke is easy, and his burden light. It is by our created rational freedom that we respond to our existence as creatures, social and political animals providentially destined together for the glory to which we are born. It is this freedom that Servais Pinckaers calls "freedom for excellence" as contrasted with the modern concept of "freedom of indifference."⁶¹ A task of a metaphysics of creation is in the first place to affirm that truth, in

⁵⁹ *ST* 1, q. 83, a. 1, ad 3.

⁶⁰ *ST* 1, q. 22, a. 2, ad 4.

⁶¹ Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, OP (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 327–78.

the second place to try to understand it better, and in the third place to show how it may inform our moral and political thought.

What could be more foreign to our modes of thought than to suggest that the condition for our freedom and autonomy is our being creatures of God, caused by God to be free in all our acts. Nietzsche was right to point out the failure of vision in those enlightened figures who thought they could have freedom and autonomy apart from God. If Nietzsche's vision failed, perhaps it was in his inability to see that freedom and autonomy need not be in eternal conflict with the eternal law of God, but might well be our participation in it, our participation, that is, in the freedom and autonomy of God. Like Euthyphro prosecuting his father, what Nietzsche lacked was an adequate metaphysics of creation.

Can there be an "account of the goods, rules and virtues that are definitive of our moral life" that does not address our condition as *creatures* of God? No. The recognition that we are creatures of God does not simply situate us with respect to God, but also with respect to one another. When we recognize that by creation our rational, social, political nature is our participation in the eternal law of God, we also recognize that the virtues of acknowledged dependence that MacIntyre discusses are the will of God for us; they are the way we approach the "more perfect existence" to which we are born as "companions in beatitude." And so when we acknowledge and freely cherish our status as creatures of God, we reconceive both the virtues themselves, and human flourishing in general insofar as they are partially constitutive of it.

V. Conclusion

These all-too-brief reflections upon the virtues of acknowledged dependence and the metaphysics of creation call for much further work. All I have provided so far are preliminary suggestions. But insofar as our status as creatures is fundamental and primary, I would like to end by asking how, as rational, social, and political animals, we give expression to the virtues when we acknowledge our dependence as creatures. Are they perhaps the virtues we give voice to in the liturgy? Do they inform in a particular way those virtues we exercise when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the dying? St. Thomas claims that it is a deliverance of

the natural law that we should worship God, even if the specification of the form that worship takes is a matter of human or divine law in particular settings. This claim poses a distinct challenge for our life together in pursuit of happiness. It suggests that the heart of flourishing as rational, social, political animals is to be found in the worship of God, the form of which worship has taken on for us the determination of the divine liturgy, the Eucharist. And here again our life as animals comes back to us. A striking feature of St. Thomas's discussion is that he constantly raises the issue about particular acts of religion whether they need to take place by bodily signs. While always asserting the necessity of interiority in acts of religion, he also always answers yes to that question. It is nearly self-evident that communal prayer should be vocal. But even in individual prayer St. Thomas gives as a reason that "vocal prayer is used [in individual prayer] so as to pay a debt, so that a man may serve God according to the whole of that which he has received from God, that is, not only with the mind, but also the body."⁶² And specifically in acts of adoration, "certain bodily signs of humility [display reverence to God], as when we genuflect we signify our weakness with respect to God; and when we prostrate ourselves we signify that of ourselves we are nothing."⁶³ Notice the plural. What I am trying to suggest is that philosophical reflection upon the virtues of acknowledged dependence points us toward human flourishing that starts on our knees with the acknowledgement "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed."

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⁶² ST 2-2, q. 83, a. 12.

⁶³ ST 2-2, q. 84, a. 2, ad 2.