

A Tale of Two Trees: Knowledge and Life in the Book of Genesis

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A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.

— William Blake

ALDOUS HUXLEY'S *Brave New World* portrays a technological utopia where sex and procreation are cleanly separated through bioengineering and state control. Most females are sterilized as embryos and the few who remain fertile at birth are conditioned to use contraceptives. All sex is purely recreational, whereas children are grown in "hatcheries" and raised in "conditioning centers." While Huxley may have thought his readers of 1932 would find this portrait self-evidently disturbing, times have changed. Many now celebrate a kinder gentler version of *Brave New World* as a mandate of civilization. To cite one example: Carl Djerassi, the Austrian chemist who helped invent the birth-control pill in 1951, recently made the alarming claim that, thanks in part to his invention, we now live in a world where "there is no connection at all between sexuality and reproduction."¹ He warns that because of this broken linkage, Austria now faces population collapse, which he describes as a "demographic catastrophe" and a "horror scenario." Djerassi then proceeds to scold his countrymen for their reproductive irresponsibility. At one point he accuses Austrian couples of "wanting to enjoy their schnitzels while leaving the rest of the world to get on with it."²

¹ Karl Djerassi, "Warum wir bald sehr alt ausschauen," *Der Standard* (December 12, 2009): Album A3.

² Ibid.

These doomsday predictions gave the unmistakable impression that Djerassi was criticizing the effects of his own invention. He quickly clarified that this was not the case.³ In subsequent articles and interviews, Djerassi has reaffirmed the virtues of non-reproductive sex as a mode of liberation, especially for women. By urging his fellow Austrians to “get on with it,” he says, he was simply exhorting couples to do their duty by replenishing the species through in-vitro fertilization. Djerassi remains puzzled and alarmed that the biological drive to reproduce by sex has not been replaced by the more cultivated desire to reproduce by technology.

Despite his vexation, Djerassi is surely right when he says that sex and reproduction are now divorced in the minds of most Europeans and, by extension, many Americans. In noting this, Djerassi voices an assumption held by Western society for decades: namely, that the connection between sex and reproduction is merely biological, and that severing this link is a morally neutral act like getting a haircut. Such an assumption may be partly based on experience, since not every conjugal act does in fact produce a child. Given the experiential gap between sex and children, why not widen the distance through various techniques, devices, or chemicals? What are the ethical implications of consciously severing the biological link between sex and procreation?

Modern reproductive technologies have brought this question to a moment of crisis. The question, however, is not new. Men and women have sought to control, modify, or even sunder the connection between sex and children for millennia. Contraceptive techniques and devices date back at least as far as ancient Egypt.⁴ Given the ancient pedigree of the question, it would be surprising if the Hebrew Scriptures were silent on the subject. To re-read what is commonly called the “temptation narrative” of Genesis 2 and 3 with this topic in mind is to face a series of questions that seem uncanny in their relevance to modern concerns. To be specific, I believe that the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life function in the narrative of Genesis in ways that address the connection between sex and procreation with peculiar intensity. In this article, I will argue that the unitive and procreative aspects of sexuality are dramatized by the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life respectively, and that the Biblical account of original sin implies, among many other things, an existential rupture between sex and procreation, between Biblical “knowledge” and the transmission of human “life.” I also hope to show how the Judeo-Christian understanding

³ Karl Djerassi, “I never blamed the pill for the fall in family size,” *The Guardian* (January 27, 2009): 33.

⁴ See Robert Jütte, *Contraception: A History* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008).

of this connection is embedded in the broader ethical context which the book Genesis both instigates and illuminates.

Before I turn to the text, however, a caveat is in order. Traditional discussions of the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life tend to be either cryptic or convoluted. Sometimes they succeed in being both. In the early Christian Church, gnostic sects performed ingenious readings of the “Tree of Knowledge” as a reference point for the pursuit of *gnosis*, or “hidden knowledge” of God. Orthodox Church Fathers responded with understandable reticence. As modern physics repeatedly demonstrates, there are some things the rational mind cannot know without distorting the object of knowledge. Jewish and Christian commentary on the two trees therefore tends to be elliptical and oblique. As Carlos Steel observes, when asked about the difference between the Tree of the Knowledge and the Tree of Life, St. Maximus the Confessor taciturnly replied:

The teachers of the church could have said much about the proposed question because of the grace given to them, but they preferred to honor this biblical text by silence, and since they knew that the understanding of the masses could not attain to the profundity of the text, they were not willing to give a profound explanation of it.⁵

While Maximus goes on to discuss the two trees as an analogy of body and soul in the light of grace and revelation, his cautionary tone is worth noting. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

In traditional exegesis, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil has broadly typified the mysterious and perverse will to define good and evil on one’s own terms, thereby cutting oneself off from God. As a result of this primordial sin, humanity fell from grace. Likewise, Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Tree of Life represents the loss of divine life and all that goes with it, including personal immortality. I have no intention of challenging these long-established readings. I am, however, suggesting that these Scriptures contain an additional layer of meaning that has deep implications for how we understand the connection between sex and procreation. My argument is intended to amplify the traditional understanding of Genesis, not to replace it.

In the second book of Genesis, God says to Adam and Eve, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall

⁵ Carlos Steel, “The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil,” in *Iohannes Scottus Eriugena: The Bible and Hermeneutics*, ed. Gerd van Riel, Carlos G. Steel, and James McEvoy (Brepols: Leuven University Press, 1996), 240.

die.”⁶ While the word “knowledge” here has many meanings, at least one of its implications is sexual “knowing.” The word יָדָא (yada) or “knowledge” is a euphemism for the conjugal act throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The word was translated into Greek as γινώσκω in the Septuagint, and appears in Luke’s Gospel when the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will conceive and bear a son. Mary responds, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?”⁷

The same word יָדָא also appears in Genesis 4:1, “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain.”⁸ Here, sexual knowledge is correlated with the begetting of new life in Eve’s firstborn child. Given this connection, how precisely are we to understand the “Tree of Knowledge” and the “Tree of Life” in the two preceding books? I am not a Scripture scholar, and I defer to the experts on some of the questions I am raising. One such question is precisely how far the story of Genesis can be applied to matters of sexuality without reducing its meaning to sexuality alone. While the sexual and procreative dimension of Genesis may constitute only one layer of its meaning, I would argue that understanding this aspect sheds considerable light on the story as a whole.

II

In Genesis 3, Satan tempts Adam and Eve to eat from the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. By doing so they are cut off from the Tree of Life and expelled from paradise. Jews and Christians alike have traditionally understood this sin as one of pride and disobedience. Given the spiritual ramifications of the passage, most commentators interpret the trees symbolically as well as literally. For example, St. Augustine says in *City of God* XIII.21 that the Tree of Life is a symbol of “wisdom herself, the mother of all good; and the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil, the experience of a broken commandment.” He continues:

These things can also and more profitably be understood of the Church, so that they become prophetic foreshadowings of things to come. Thus . . . the tree of life is the holy of holies, Christ; the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the will’s free choice. For if man despise the will of God, he can only destroy himself; and so he learns the difference between consecrating himself to the common good and reveling in his own. For he who loves himself is abandoned to himself, in order that, being overwhelmed with fears and sorrows, he may cry,

⁶ Gn 2:16–17. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁷ Lk 1:34.

⁸ Gn 4:1.

if there be yet soul in him to feel his ills, in the words of the psalm, "My soul is cast down within me," and when chastened, may say, "Because of his strength I will wait upon You." These and similar allegorical interpretations may be suitably put upon Paradise without giving offense to any one, while yet we believe the strict truth of the history, confirmed by its circumstantial narrative of facts.⁹

Augustine goes on to say that Adam and Eve's transgression resulted in their alienation from God and subsequent loss of personal immortality. Such a reading constitutes the literal meaning of the text.

In addition to its literal dimension, most scholars agree that the early books of Genesis are suffused with complex elements of wordplay, symbolism, dramatic irony, and other literary devices with which modern readers tend to be unfamiliar. These literary elements play a significant role in the temptation narrative. After the creation account of Genesis 1, we learn in Genesis 2 that God "planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed."¹⁰ We also read that "out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."¹¹ This may seem clear enough at first. God planted two trees, and both were "in the midst" of the garden, as the *Revised Standard Version* renders it. The *New American Bible* and the *New International Version*, however, translate the two trees as being "in the middle" of the garden. The Hebrew word in question is תוֹר (tavek), which can mean generally "among" or more specifically "in the center." If the word does refer to the center of the garden, a logistical question arises as to how two trees can occupy a single midpoint. This question has in fact puzzled a number of exegetes.

God then issues his prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'"¹² The divine mandate clearly names the Tree of Knowledge in this passage, and we might expect to find the same clarity in the temptation narrative of Genesis 3. But this is precisely what we do not find.

In the third book of Genesis, Satan asks the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?" Eve responds, not by referring to

⁹ St. Augustine, *City of God*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 256.

¹⁰ Gn 2:8.

¹¹ Gn 2:9.

¹² Gn 2:16–17.

the prohibition against the Tree of Knowledge, but by saying, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the *tree which is in the midst of the garden*, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’”¹³ And which tree would that be? As Genesis 2 makes clear, both the tree of Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are located in the “midst” or “middle” of the garden. Eve’s vague identification of the tree by location alone is most peculiar, given the gravity of the situation. Some scholars see in this textual ambiguity an element of profound irony. As Trygve Mettinger observes in *The Eden Narrative* (2007):

On the surface level of the text, the phrase “in the midst of the garden” in 2:9 is valid for both trees; the woman makes no real “mistake” in 3:3. On a deeper level, however, the poet subtly plays on the variation between 2:9 (tree of life in the midst) and 3:3 (tree of knowledge in the midst). When the woman uses the expression “in the midst of the garden” (3:3), she creates a *double entendre*. The linguistic referent in her crucial statement is the tree of knowledge; this is clear from what immediately follows. At the same time, she inadvertently *alludes* to the tree of life, which we find at the beginning and end of the text. Or, to be more exact: the narrator makes this important allusion. The tree of life was, as the reader recalls—and as both God and the narrator know—planted “in the midst” of the garden” (2:9). . . .

What we have in the woman’s words is, in fact, a case of situational irony. . . . The woman refers to the tree of knowledge, but the way she expresses herself invites the reader to understand the utterance as a tacit allusion to the tree of life. This understanding is unintended by the woman, but probably intended by the narrator.¹⁴

Such an ironic “double vision” of the forbidden tree raises a number of questions about the nature of the divine prohibition itself. For example, why in Genesis 2:16–17 does God issue his command to Adam alone, just before he creates Eve? Most commentators speculate that Eve would have learned about the divine prohibition indirectly from Adam, which might help to explain her obscure reference. She seems not even to know the tree’s proper name. In fact, it may even be Satan who first associates the forbidden tree with “knowledge” in Eve’s mind when he says, “You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”¹⁵ He does not promise her “life” in any form, eternal or otherwise. Consequently, Eve partakes

¹³ Gn 3:2–3, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Trygve N. D. Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 2–3* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 38.

¹⁵ Gn 3:4–5.

of the tree only when she sees “that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise.”¹⁶ Eve’s ambiguous reference to the “tree in the middle” may therefore represent an unfallen consciousness that has not yet made the distinction between knowledge and life. At the same time, the ironic wordplay also dramatizes the narrator’s (and the reader’s) sadder but wiser view of the rupture between knowledge and life after the fall.

Eve’s equivocal response to Satan also raises the fascinating question as to whether there are really two trees there at all, or only one tree viewed under two aspects. Some biblical scholars have theorized that the temptation narrative was reworked from earlier sources in which only one tree appeared. Would this earlier tree have been identified with the Tree of Knowledge or with the Tree of Life? According to Mettinger, “scholars working along literary-critical lines of the traditional, continental type usually find the tree of knowledge to be the original tree, the tree of life being a later development. . . . A reverse perspective—first the tree of life and then also the tree of knowledge—has only been adopted by a few exegetes.”¹⁷ The textual origins of Genesis, however, are not directly relevant to the topic at hand. As Mettinger observes:

This narrative stands out as one literary unit. A vast amount of scholarly energy has gone into critical surgery, experiments that seriously maimed the patient. In contrast to this, I have argued that the text works excellently as a narrative about the failure of the first humans and the calamitous consequences of this failure. The tensions that may be found in the text hardly suffice to falsify this conclusion. Rather, they should be seen as resulting from the tradition-historical process that lies behind the narrative.¹⁸

Thus, despite the fact that the author of Genesis may have derived images and themes from prior sources, the unified narrative remains. Robert Gordis puts the matter clearly:

The assumption made a generation ago that that alleged biblical redactor operated mechanically with his sources and could not be expected to have had any intelligent view of the material he used is now rightly rejected by contemporary research. Even if “sources” were to be assumed, we still must come to grips with the conception underlying the “finished product” that we find in Genesis. It is recognized today that the architectonic structure of the pentateuchal narrative, and

¹⁶ Gn 3:6.

¹⁷ Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative*, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

particularly of Genesis, cannot be the result of chance or of a “scissors and paste” method of compilation, but represents a religious and literary achievement of the highest order.¹⁹

This narrative unity holds especially true for the two trees as they work together in the story. Ivan Engnell remarks that “we can do no better than take the whole for what it really is, a single unitary story” in which “*both* trees are from the very beginning organically at home in the narrative.”²⁰ On this view, both trees are essential to the text of Genesis as it has informed Judeo-Christian tradition for more than two millennia.

Given this dramatic unity, commentators have understood the complex relation between the two trees in Genesis in a variety of ways. In the second-century “Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus,” for example, the anonymous Christian author exhorts his reader to cultivate the “paradise” within which God plants by grace:

For in this place the tree of knowledge and the tree of life have been planted; but it is not the tree of knowledge that destroys—it is disobedience that proves destructive. Nor truly are those words without significance which are written, how God from the beginning planted the tree of life in the midst of paradise, revealing through knowledge the way to life, and when those who were first formed did not use this [knowledge] properly, they were, through the fraud of the Serpent, stripped naked. For neither can life exist without knowledge, nor is knowledge secure without life. Wherefore both were planted close together.²¹

If indeed Genesis depicts God as “revealing through knowledge the way to life,” why then was the Tree of Knowledge forbidden? Writing two centuries later, St. Ephrem pursues this very question. In his *Hymns on Paradise*, he locates the Garden of Eden on a mountain at the top of which grows the Tree of Life, with the Tree of Knowledge growing farther down the slope. This topographical conceit allows him to place the Tree of Life literally “in the middle” of the garden, while still locating the Tree of Knowledge more generally in the “midst.” In III.13, Ephrem draws an analogy between the Tree of Life and the Holy of Holies in the Jewish Temple, with the Tree of Knowledge serving as the sanctuary veil or gateway:

¹⁹ Robert Gordis, “The Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Old Testament and the Qumran Scrolls,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76 (1957): 129.

²⁰ Ivan Engnell, “‘Knowledge’ and ‘Life’ in the Creation Story,” *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 110.

²¹ “Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 29–30.

The tree was to him
 like a gate;
 its fruit was the veil
 covering that hidden Tabernacle.
 Adam snatched the fruit,
 casting aside the commandment.
 When he beheld the Glory
 within,
 shining forth with its rays,
 he fled outside;
 he ran off and took refuge
 among the modest fig trees.²²

Ephrem goes on to say that Adam and Eve as yet knew nothing about the Tree of Life. Had they kept God's command, he says, they would have been allowed to eat from both trees. As he explains in his *Commentary on Genesis 2:3*:

Had the serpent been rejected, along with the sin, they would have eaten of the Tree of Life, and the Tree of Knowledge would not have been withheld from them any longer; from the one they would have acquired infallible knowledge, and from the other they would have received immortal life. They would have acquired divinity (*allahutha*) in humanity, and had they thus acquired infallible knowledge and immortal life, they would have done so in this body.²³

God's prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge was therefore temporary and provisional. The forbidden tree would have been not only allowed, but a positive corollary to eating from the Tree of Life had Adam and Eve maintained their original innocence.

If Ephrem connects the two trees intimately, other Church Fathers go even deeper in their philosophical exegesis of Genesis, seeing not two separate trees but a single tree viewed in two ways. As inheritors of the neo-Platonic tradition, many see the Tree of Life as typifying the human capacity for participating in "mind" or "spirit" (associated with divinity), whereas the Tree of Knowledge typifies imprisonment in the bodily senses. In his book *The Experience of God*, Eastern Orthodox theologian Dumitru Stăniloae identifies a common thread running through the commentaries of St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Gregory Palamas, St. Basil, and others:

²² St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, ed. and trans. Sebastian P. Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 95.

²³ *Ibid.*, 214.

The fathers cited above imply that by the two trees we are to understand one and the same world: viewed through a mind moved by spirit, that world is the tree of life that puts us in relationship with God; but viewed and made use of through a consciousness that has been detached from the mind moved by spirit, it represents the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which severs man from God.²⁴

Stăniloae pays special attention to Gregory of Nyssa's treatise "On the Making of Man," where Gregory emphasizes the role of the senses in the temptation narrative:

Like the fathers mentioned above, St. Gregory of Nyssa saw the tree of knowledge especially in the sensible aspect of the world, but he put particular stress on the fact that this aspect may give rise to evil in the human person because it is grasped in an exclusive manner through the senses. In itself the sensible aspect of the world is by no means evil but can become quite dangerous for the human person because the senses, before they are spiritually strengthened, can be easily inflamed by the sensible beauty of the world.²⁵

On this view, Gregory understands Adam and Eve's first sin as a "grasping" after knowledge in the form of physical sensation, which thereby separated the material from the spiritual. Gregory does in fact say in "On the Making of Man" that the Tree of Knowledge tempted Adam and Eve with what "appears to be good in so far as it affects the senses with sweetness."²⁶ Although Gregory never condemns the body as such (doing so would verge on the Manichean heresy), his warnings against the bodily senses may contain echoes of gnosticism, with its distrust of the senses and its pitting of mind against matter. Such a dualistic understanding would have been alien to the ancient Hebrew imagination, which saw all of material creation as emphatically good. If the "grasping" of Adam and Eve cannot be fully accounted for by excessive sensuality, what then was the essence of their sin?

Hans Urs von Balthasar agrees with Stăniloae that Gregory and others understood the two trees as somehow unified before the Fall, and that the essence of the first sin lay in "grasping" after knowledge. But unlike Stăniloae, von Balthasar refuses to associate the Tree of Knowledge with

²⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God: Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer, vol. 2 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), 166–67.

²⁵ Ibid., 167.

²⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 410.

“the senses” and the Tree of Life with “mind” or “spirit.” Rather, he leaves the correlation veiled in mystery. Thus he says in *The Christian State of Life*:

Gregory of Nyssa and others comment that, since there could not have been two trees in the center of the garden, there must have been a mysterious identity between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The tree was forbidden insofar as it gave knowledge of good and evil, for this was the only fruit man could take for himself. If he were not to die, he would in any case have to receive from God the original life that was opposed to death. And he was to receive it without grasping for it, without seeking it in the knowledge of good and evil.²⁷

In this regard, von Balthasar’s vision approaches the Hebrew reluctance to divide body and spirit, or to see this conflict as a primary factor in the sin of Adam and Eve. Mind/body dualism may indeed be a great evil. But it is not the essence of the Fall in the Hebrew imagination. We must look instead for a more fundamental spiritual conflict.

Von Balthasar’s remarks on the elusive unity of the two trees is paralleled by the Jewish mystical tradition. As Gershom Scholem observes in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*:

The trees in Paradise are not merely physical trees; beyond this they point to a state of things which they represent symbolically. In the opinion of Jewish mystics both trees are in essence one. They grow out into two directions from a common trunk. Genesis tells us that the Tree of Life stood in the center of Paradise, but it does not indicate the exact position of the Tree of Knowledge. The Kabbalists took this to mean that it had no special place of its own but sprouted together with the Tree of Life out of the common matrix of the divine world.²⁸

If the two trees were essentially one, he says, then Adam and Eve’s sin lay precisely in cleaving the one from the other. Scholem continues:

The sin of Adam was that he isolated the Tree of Life from the Tree of Knowledge to which he directed his desire. Once the unity of the two trees in men’s lives was destroyed, there began the dominion of the Tree of Knowledge. No longer did unitary gushing, unrestrained life prevail, but the duality of good and evil in which the Torah appears in this aspect of revelation. Since the expulsion from Paradise, in the exile in

²⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 89.

²⁸ Gershom Gerhard Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 69.

which we all now find ourselves, we can no longer apperceive the world as a unified whole. . . .

Only the redemption, breaking the dominion of exile, puts an end to the order of the Tree of Knowledge and restores the utopian order of the Tree of Life. . . . The Torah of the Messianic age will be that of the Tree of Life, which no longer knows anything of all those separations and limitations.²⁹

The Fall of man thus occurred through some essential misappropriation of knowledge in its relation to life. As a result, man was cut off from life, also in some fundamental way.

But here another problem arises. If Adam and Eve's sin lay in separating knowledge from life, it would seem that God has already separated the two by naming the Tree of Knowledge as such. Does not this distinction implicate God in the first sin? Herein lies one more reason for the textual ambiguity over the number of trees "in the middle" of the garden. The inspired writer of Genesis may well be trying to express a pre-lapsarian reality to post-lapsarian minds. From the fallen perspective, God's act of naming the forbidden tree assumes the very division it prohibits. This dilemma over naming is not unlike the particle/wave conundrum regarding light in modern physics. We know that light is not two things but one thing. We also know that light behaves differently in various contexts; so differently, in fact, that we call it by two different names. In some experiments we call it a particle; in others we call it a wave. Operating in a similar mode of quantum duality, the text of Genesis presents us with a tree that seems both singular and double. In this regard, the Genesis author may well be trying to dramatize a connection between two seemingly unrelated things which the fallen mind can barely conceive as a unity.

This "double vision" of knowledge and life also raises a metaphysical question. Can two things be *two* things, and still be *one* thing? For example, are body and soul two things or one thing? Philosophers from Aristotle onward have sometimes answered this knotty question by replying "both." Body and soul are not the same thing; they are distinct. But neither are they two separate things; they co-inhere in a unified living organism. Thus if we know one thing as distinct from another thing, we need not know them as fundamentally separated. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge once observed in *Biographia Literaria*:

The office of philosophical *disquisition* consists in just *distinction*; while it is the privilege of the philosopher to preserve himself constantly aware, that distinction is not division. In order to obtain adequate notions of

²⁹ Ibid., 69–70.

any truth, we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts; and this is the technical *process* of philosophy. But having so done, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity, in which they actually co-exist; and this is the *result* of philosophy.³⁰

Understood along these lines, the book of Genesis presents us with a spiritual vision in which knowledge and life are distinct but undivided. The temptation, however, turns distinction into separation. Satan holds out the possibility that Adam and Eve will know “as God knows.” But what precisely does this mean?

Given that God is in no way dependent on his own creation, his transcendence entails his radical “separateness.” While creation participates in God’s goodness, God does not participate in his own creation (although he is immanent to it by virtue of his omnipresence). As Aquinas says in *Summa theologiae*, “the first and best good (i.e. God) does not participate in goodness, for being good by essence is prior to being good by a kind of participation.”³¹ He says much the same thing in *Summa contra Gentiles*:

That which is can participate in something, but the act of being can participate in nothing. For that which participates is in potency, and being is an act. But God is being itself, as we have proved. He is not, therefore, by participation good; He is good essentially.³²

Given that God infinitely transcends his own creation, his perfect knowledge must also be independent of the creation he knows. Although God’s knowledge and life are both eternal, the Scriptures portray his knowledge as temporally preceding the creation of life. Thus God says to the prophet Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.”³³ In Adam’s experience, however, just the opposite is the case. God breathes the breath of life into Adam first, and only later does Adam begin to know

³⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 2, ed. W. Jackson Bate and James Engell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 11.

³¹ *Summa theologiae* I, q. 3, a. 2, corp.: “Primum autem quod est bonum et optimum, quod Deus est, non est bonum per participationem, quia bonum per essentiam, prius est bono per participationem.” Translation from *Aquinas: Summa Theologiae, Questions on God*, ed. Brian Leftow and Brian Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 32.

³² *Summa contra Gentiles*, lib. 1, cap. 38, n. 5: “Id quod est participare aliquid potest, ipsum autem esse nihil: quod enim participat potentia est, esse autem actus est. Sed Deus est ipsum esse, ut probatum est. Non est igitur bonus participative, sed essentialiter.” Translation from *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith (Summa Contra Gentiles)*, vol. 1, trans. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 153.

³³ Jer 1:5.

creation by naming it. Adam's knowledge participates in the gift of life and not the other way around. Adam lives and therefore knows. He does not know and therefore live—Descartes notwithstanding. Satan's temptation is nothing less than the suggestion that Adam and Eve invert the order of life and knowledge. In their perverse attempt to know as God knows, they aspire to know absolutely and not through participation. In doing so they separate knowledge from life.

This redefinition of knowledge constitutes a closing in of the self on itself. To know in this way is to extract experience for its own sake by sundering it from its vital context. The same pattern emerges in eating disorders such as bulimia, in which the "knowledge" of food is separated from its nutritive "life." C. S. Lewis often draws parallels between eating and sex to illustrate this strange dissociation:

The monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union (the sexual) from all the other kinds of union which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union. The Christian attitude does not mean that there is anything wrong about sexual pleasure, any more than about the pleasure of eating. It means that you must not isolate that pleasure and try to get it by itself, any more than you ought to try to get the pleasures of taste without swallowing and digesting, by chewing things and spitting them out again.³⁴

Although Lewis does not mention it here, one of the other "kinds of union" that go along with sexual union is the literal unity of a single child emerging from the union of two other human beings. Union thus begets unity.

In what sense then is God's prohibition against eating from the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" really a command not to separate knowledge and life? Gordis sheds light on this pivotal question by proposing a different translation of the Hebrew words **טוֹב** and **רָע**, traditionally rendered as "good" and "evil." Based on the occurrence of these same Hebrew words in similar contexts, Gordis says that the words should be translated as "natural" and "unnatural." Thus he explains:

On the other hand, we believe that the phrase may have originated in the two aspects of sexual experience, the normal (**טוֹב**) manifestations of the impulse and the abnormal (**רָע**). The variety and frequency of variant sexual patterns are well attested in biblical narrative and law. For the ancients, the line of demarcation between normal and abnormal forms of sexual experience was by no means as distinct as it is in the modern world, at least in its official code. . . .

³⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 104–5.

The specific connotation here proposed for מֹדַע “natural and unnatural,” may be supported by two similar biblical passages. In the story of Lot’s difficulties with the Sodomites and in the equally primitive tale of the Levite from Mt. Ephraim and his concubine, who are attacked by the inhabitants of Gibeah in Benjamin, the townsmen demand that the male guest(s) be handed over to them וַיִּדְרֹשׁוּ אֹתָם (Gn 19:5); וַיִּדְרֹשׁוּ (Jgs 19:22). In each case, the host replies אַל . . . תִּדְרֹשׁ [“do not act so wickedly,” RSV] and expresses his willingness to offer up instead a woman to their lust. The latter phrase, as Ehrlich correctly noted, cannot mean, “do not do wickedly,” for violating the chastity of an innocent woman is surely an evil. Ehrlich therefore renders rightly “do not act unnaturally.” Now, if דָּרַשׁ refers to the abnormal aspects, מֹדַע would refer to the normal, and the phrase “knowing good and evil” becomes a stereotyped idiom encompassing the entire range of sexual experience.³⁵

On this reading, Genesis 2:9 should be translated as “the tree of the knowledge of *natural* and *unnatural*,” rather than “*good* and *evil*.” Since the natural end of sexual knowledge is the transmission of new life, Gordis’s emended translation implies that the divine prohibition is at least in part a mandate against “unnatural knowledge”—that is, a command not to cut off sexual knowing from the transmission of life. The textual correlation between the sin of Genesis 3 and the sin of sodomy in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 is especially illuminating, since sodomy even more violently ruptures the connection between sex and procreation.

If Genesis dramatizes the pursuit of knowledge cut off from life, what are we to make of Adam and Eve’s banishment from Eden? As with Dante’s portrayal of sinners in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, the sin carries with it its own punishment:

Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever”—therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.³⁶

Although it is possible to interpret Adam and Eve’s expulsion as an arbitrary punishment, a closer reading of the text suggests otherwise. Before banishing them, God also announces individual punishments for Adam

³⁵ Gordis, “The Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Old Testament and the Qumran Scrolls,” 131–33.

³⁶ Gn 3:22–24.

and Eve. God says to Eve, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children . . .," and to Adam he says, "cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread."³⁷ Note that both penalties involve procreation: Eve will suffer in bearing children and Adam will suffer in feeding them. Both punishments dampen the desire to transmit life. While Adam and Eve's loss of personal immortality is the primary penalty for their transgression, the interior counterpart may well be a rupture between the desire for sexual knowledge and the desire to give and receive new life in the form of children. In other words, Adam and Eve are punished by getting what they want (knowledge apart from life) and by their subsequent inability to want knowledge and life in their original unity. As with most spiritual warfare, the battle is fought along the frontier of human desire.

III

If Genesis depicts a spiritual rupture between sex and procreation, other Scriptures dramatize a unity which grace may restore. But how is the cleavage to be healed? As Scholem says, "Only the redemption, breaking the dominion of exile, puts an end to the order of the Tree of Knowledge and restores the utopian order of the Tree of Life." Although Scholem is referring to Jewish Messianism, his observation applies equally well to the Christian tradition. As Christ says to the churches in Revelation 2:7, "To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." A number of Christian writers have also identified the cross of Christ with the Tree of Life. In *The Tree of Life*, for example, St. Bonaventure meditates extensively on the cross as an emblem of the life of Christ, who is himself a mystical tree upon which life-giving virtues blossom. In a more nuptial vein, St. John of the Cross portrays the soul's espousal to God in *The Spiritual Canticle* by imagining a dialog between Bridegroom and Bride in a garden that harks back to Eden:

Beneath the apple tree:
 There I took you for My own,
 There I offered you My hand,
 And restored you,
 Where your mother was corrupted.³⁸

³⁷ Gn 3:16–19.

³⁸ St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1979), 499.

Commenting on his own verse line by line, John says the following:

The Bridegroom explains to the soul in this stanza His admirable plan in redeeming and espousing her to Himself through the very means by which human nature was corrupted and ruined, telling her that as human nature through Adam was ruined and corrupted by means of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Paradise, so on the tree of the cross it was redeemed and restored when He gave it there, through His Passion and Death the hand of his favor and mercy, and broke down the barriers between God and man which were built up through original sin.

Thus he says:

3. Beneath the apple tree:

That is, beneath the favor of the tree of the cross (referred to by the apple tree), where the Son of God redeemed human nature and consequently espoused it to Himself and then espoused each soul by giving it through the cross grace and pledges for this espousal.

And thus he says:

4. There I took you for My own
There I offered you My hand,

That is: there I offered you My kind regard and help by raising you from your low state to My companion and spouse.

5. And restored you,
Where your mother was corrupted.

For human nature, your mother, was corrupted in your first parents, under the tree, and you too under the tree of the cross were restored. If your mother, therefore, brought you death under the tree, I, under the tree of the cross, brought you life.³⁹

For John, the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life are reunited in the one tree of the cross. Through the sacrifice of Christ, the redeemed and spousal “knowing” between God and the soul restores the natural unity between knowledge and life which Adam and Eve ruptured. The New Testament is replete with similar formulations that reintegrate knowledge and life, as when Christ says simply that “this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.”⁴⁰ What Christian theologians call “salvation history” may here be applied to the way in which the internal connection between knowledge and life was wounded, and how it may be healed by grace.

³⁹ Ibid., 499–500.

⁴⁰ Jn 17:3.

Although the ethical history of contraception is exceedingly complex, the practice was seen as “unnatural” in most Christian churches prior to the Lambeth Conference of 1930, when the Anglican Church broke with tradition and allowed the practice between married couples for “grave reasons.”⁴¹ Most other Protestant denominations followed suit. The Catholic Church, however, has maintained the traditional view, reiterated in *Humanae Vitae* (1968), which reaffirms “the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning.”⁴² Seen in this light, the terms “unitive” and “procreative” would seem applicable to the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life respectively—as would the “inseparable connection” between them portrayed in Genesis.

More recently, Pope John Paul II has meditated deeply on the profound unity between “knowledge” and “life” in *Theology of the Body*, a series of reflections on the book of Genesis in light of the Gospel. In one passage, Blessed John Paul makes what some have called a revolutionary observation regarding the “divine image” in which Adam and Eve were created. He says that this image comprises not merely reason or free will (although these are included), but the capacity for sexual love and procreation. He does this by explicating Genesis 1:27–28:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”⁴³

According to John Paul, this remarkable passage shows how “*man became the image of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons*, which man and woman form from the very beginning. . . . Man becomes an image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion.”⁴⁴ John Paul goes on to say that the conjugal embrace of man and woman illustrates the “spousal meaning of the body,” as they give themselves totally and freely to one

⁴¹ Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 5–6.

⁴² *Humanae Vitae*, no. 12.

⁴³ Gn 1:27–28.

⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 163, emphasis in original.

another in love. Man and woman thus become an image of God through knowledge in the nuptial sense.

But John Paul goes further. After creating male and female together as the divine image, God charges Adam and Eve in the very next verse to “be fruitful and multiply.” John Paul reads this exuberant command as another aspect of the same image, insofar as the divine nature creates life out of love. Thus he says that “the mystery of his creation (‘in the image of God he created him’) corresponds [with] the perspective of procreation (‘be fruitful and multiply’).”⁴⁵ The divine image is fully constituted by marital love and by the child that love produces, taken together as a unity. In other words, the divine image in Genesis 1 is precisely the union between knowledge and life. It is that image which the first sin mysteriously defaces in the story of the two trees.

In one passage, John Paul says that, despite the ruptured bond between sex and procreation caused by the Fall, Genesis nonetheless affords a glimpse of that unity persisting after the Fall:

Procreation brings it about that “the man and the woman (his wife)” *know each other reciprocally in the “third,” originated by both*. For this reason, this “knowledge” becomes in some way a revelation of the new man, in whom both, the man and the woman, again recognize each other, their humanity, their living image.⁴⁶

Despite their newly fallen state, Adam and Eve’s knowledge of one another in sexual intimacy only deepens when they behold the living face of their first child. The unity of knowledge and life thus abide in the image of the human family.

If *Theology of the Body* suggests that knowledge and life are fully united in the Judeo-Christian vision of the human family, Djerassi and others continue to dream of their final divorce. The trouble is that only half their dream has come true. The majority of couples in the West have wholeheartedly embraced sexual knowledge divorced from life, and no amount of chiding will now induce them to encumber their relationships with reproductive gadgetry. Nor does the grueling prospect of raising children seem terribly attractive as they pursue the mirage of perpetual romance afforded by contraceptive culture. Progressive couples will “enjoy their schnitzels” and leave the transmission of life to the “experts”—that is, to men in white coats who work for corporations, the government, or both. In meantime, if procreation fails to be taken over by the technicians,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 211–12, emphasis in original.

birthrates will continue to spiral downward. The end result is not hard to predict. John Paul II spoke repeatedly about an encroaching “Culture of Death” which may be literally realized sooner than he foresaw.

As sociologists puzzle over the phenomenon of population collapse in Europe, which is now spreading to Iran and other Arab countries, they will be forced to return to one central question: why don’t contemporary couples *want* to have children? How did an entire culture lose its desire for life? Since the publication of *Brave New World*, other literary voices have joined Huxley’s in holding up a mirror to Western societies, asking whether an oversexed and childless world is really so desirable after all. P. D. James’s novel *The Children of Men* (1992), which was made into a popular film, asks just such a question. Meanwhile, the book of Genesis speaks with renewed urgency to a culture in the process of choosing knowledge at the expense of life. As it has done from the beginning, the story of the two trees illuminates the subterranean connection between sex and procreation, as well as the personal and social consequences of sundering that living bond. N·V