Mystery and the Ascent
Through Choice

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"We suppose that sight improves as objects are conquered… it is perfected in their loss."

-Michel de Certeau, *White Ecstasy*

Most of my philosophy teachers would begin their course by underlining that any philosophical reflection is provoked by a moment of anomaly. An anomaly or disorder from how things usually work catches the mind's attention and awakens it by leading it to question and reflection: for instance, a missing book from the shelf, an unsettling silence of an extroverted friend, or a death of a loved one.

For me, it was a line from my Philosophy of Religion professor that left me both in awe and confusion. He said beautifully in Filipino, *"Sa pagpapakilala ng Diyos, nagtatago ang Diyos"* (As God reveals who he is, he hides). The ambiguity of the statement led me to question if God is truly knowable in his all-at-once-revealing-and-hiding. If he is knowable, up to what extent is he knowable? How much of him is known, and how much is hidden and remains inaccessible to me? What makes him knowable at all? As the confusion in ambiguity continually persists in my consciousness, my mind also responds by wrestling with it. It is always ongoing because a question is only answered by another question.

The philosophical enterprise as an ongoing questioning and questioning further is marked by fecundity because it gives birth to new insights. After all, to question is to begin a quest in shedding light on unknown things in order to understand them. Having a new in-"sight" can mean that I have a new understanding about a certain thing. Hence, an "aha!" moment is also an "I see…" moment. In other words, when we gain new insights, we see, we understand, we grasp the thing questioned.

But then, sometimes, the endless questioning in philosophy strikes me as a futile task. It is almost like philosophy as a discipline of questioning is absurd because despite its forward motion, it eventually seems to move towards the direction where nothing can be seen. The quest to uncover will inevitably point me to a certain hiddenness. This moving-towards-hiddenness reminds me of a term we used in linear drawing when I was still studying architecture in college: the vanishing point.

The Humility of the Vanishing Point

The vanishing point is used in drawings to represent three-dimensional models which are usually called perspectives. It is the point where all lines converge. Let us paint a picture: you are walking along Katipunan Avenue, and you try to look as far as your eyes can take you. Then you will notice that everything – road, buildings, center island, light posts, line of trees – converge into a single point. This is the point where everything becomes hidden, as it were, because my vision can no longer see anything beyond that point of convergence. Things that lie beyond the point of convergence vanish even if I focus my eyes for a long time. If the discipline

of questioning that is innate in philosophy is as futile as straining my eyes to see what is beyond the vanishing point, then what good can it give?

Socrates is well aware that the discipline of questioning is more important than finding answers when we see philosophy as love for wisdom. Most of his dialogues, if not all, possess such a character of criticizing, refuting, and examining arguments until his interlocutors reach the inevitable point of *aporia,* or not finding a definitive answer to a question. But then, the beauty of an aporetic moment is that it leaves the person perplexed insofar as it opens the person to the humbling discipline that is philosophy. Indeed, no question is answered, but a new insight is gained: I know that I do not know.

A moment of *aporia* is similar to walking straight towards the vanishing point, only to realize that as you go closer, the point of convergence continues to recede further into its hiddenness (which can lead to even more perplexity!). If anything, the point of perplexity is crucial because it can either leave the person stunned and motionless or it can drive the person to inquire all the more.

However, despite the seeming futility of running towards an ever-receding point, the frustration of not finding answers, and the hiddenness in all that there is to know, does it truly stop us from questioning?

Mind for Mystery

For the medieval thinker and theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas, the human mind possesses an unrestricted drive to

know all that there is to know about all that there is.[1] A human being's power above all other beings lies in the capacity to question what things are, why things are, and how all things fit in the greater scheme. In other words, the mind's intending towards the many things, or for Aquinas, *beings*, that can be known shows its openness to the vastness of reality and its drive to seek a vision of unity in it. On the flipside, *beings* can be known because they are open to being known, but only through a dramatic unveiling. Hence, there is openness between the mind's intelligence and its unrestricted drive to know the whole of reality and *being's* intrinsic intelligibility that reveals itself gradually.

But then, the enterprise of knowing proves to be tedious and tricky. After all, knowing seeks certainty that supposedly sheds light on things that are "hidden" in the darkness of unknowing. Many philosophers have tried to pin down how we know and what we can know. Yet their efforts only open seekers to further questioning such as, "Do we know things as they really are or only as we perceive them?" Things become even more complicated because of the one reality we cannot escape as human beings: change.

One of my favorite references to fluctuating reality is Heraclitus' river allegory. A flowing river is filled with much life and movement that one cannot grasp, not even literally, as there are no two moments when the river is exactly the same. Moreover, Plato deemed that whatever is changing belongs to a lower kind of reality. It is a mere appearance of an immutable higher reality called the Forms where true knowledge lies. Appearances appeal to the senses, which deceive and are

1 Gerald McCool, *The Universe as Journey: Conversations with W. Norris Clarke, S.J.*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988), 255-281.

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therefore not a reliable foundation to attain true knowledge. In short, knowledge remains uncertain in the realm of change or the sensible world as we know it.

Among the thinkers of the Modern period, it is perhaps Descartes who is most allergic to uncertainty. In fact, he nitpicks everything in order to discover a way out of the hiddenness in things and trickery of change. Using his method of doubting, Descartes succeeds in finding that one thing unblemished by uncertainty: the mind as the thinking thing. The thinking thing is indubitably real and exists insofar as it is doubting, which is an act of thinking (*cogito ergo sum*). Now perhaps we can say that nothing is hidden because the starting point of all knowing is the conscious "I" and not the object being known. In effect, the "I" knows by surrounding, engulfing, and assimilating objects outside of itself and imposing meaning on them. The "I" is at the center where nothing is hidden because everything else is a mere derivative reality.

What happens then to a person who is known only through the "I" imposing meaning and not letting the person unfold? The person is reduced to an object, a thing-thrown-in-front to be examined like a statue. I remember reading *Heaven in Stone and Glass: Experiencing the Spirituality of the Great Cathedrals* where Robert Barron distinguished a statue from an icon and how the latter can be an avenue for deepening one's spirituality.[2] On the one hand, a statue is three-dimensional, and therefore, one can go around it, examine its proportions, and identify its material. There is no element of "beyond" when looking at a statue because one can almost immediately say, "Hey! This is an object!" On the other hand, an icon,

2 Robert Barron, *Heaven in Stone and Glass: Experiencing the Spirituality of the Great Cathedrals* (Crossroad, 2002).

because it is two-dimensional, acts as a window. For instance, consider the orthodox icon of Christ the *Pantocrator*. If one looks at Jesus' eyes, there is a certain depth that invites and captivates the observer. There is a "beyond" in the depth of the eyes, and there is also something beyond the limits of the boundaries framing the icon which remains to be inaccessible to the observer. Therefore, the spirituality of an icon is in its capacity to open the person to something that escapes the "I's" imposition of meaning. The "I" cannot surround, engulf, and conquer what is inaccessible and hidden from its understanding.

The Persisting Itch for Mystery

A sense of bringing into light the hiddenness of things mysterious is one thing that gives the human person the drive to know. I, for one, love crime-suspense thrillers because it is always a delight to be at the edge of my seat as I try to play detective inside my head. People like me love to read suspense-thrillers not because we are psychopaths but because there is a rush in feeling that one is participating in completing a suspense-thriller narrative.[3] There is an itch to uncover what is hidden and to find out what will happen next. The rush we get in reading is not just in the gut, but more so in the mind. It is an intellectual rush. Violence and crime are anomalies in the routines of daily life, and this is why they draw attention and invite further thought.[4] One knows that such disturbance in the norm demands from the mind a

3 "The Psychology of Suspense," *Crime Reads*, https://crimereads.com/the-psychology-of-suspense/ (accessed March 11, 2021).

4 "Why are We Obsessed with Psychological Thrillers," *The Times of India*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/O-zone/why-are-we-obsessed-with-psychological-thrillers/ (accessed March 11, 2021).

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reason for the unfolding of the events and even its own solution to the problem.

Saint Thomas Aquinas further elaborates such dynamism between the intending "I" and the unfolding mystery of being: again, the relationship between the human mind's intelligence and being's inherent intelligibility. According to Aquinas, the mind and being are radically for each other; they define each other and are correlatives.[5] It is almost like saying that one cannot exist while the other does not. In other words, mystery can only be mystery insofar as there is a conscious being that sheds light on its mysteriousness. Heidegger reiterates that it is the human being's vocation to speak of that mystery as it unfolds from the darkness.

The darkness of mystery can both be frightening and awesome, mysterium tremendum et fascinosum, as Otto describes it. What comes to mind when talking about the combination of fear and awe is the journey of Alice into the depths of Wonderland. For one, I choose to believe that the author of Alice in Wonderland did not arbitrarily select the name of the protagonist who slowly discovers the mystery of Wonderland. The name "Alice" can be traced to its roots in the Greek word aletheia, which means "to unveil" or "to uncover." Alice also finds herself in an unknown land, and there are a lot of moments when she is threatened and frightened by the new and unusual things that she sees. But despite the dangers that Alice experiences in the depths of Wonderland, she still went on deeper and deeper into the darkness of mystery.

5 W. Norris Clarke, "Action as the Self-Revelation of Being," in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being-God-Person* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

Loss of Sight and the Logic of Love

It is easier to associate mystery with darkness because in darkness, as in mystery, one can easily lose sight. Yet the experience of Saint Anselm of Canterbury in his journey of seeking what (or who) can be considered as the mystery of mysteries, namely God, is an experience of a loss of sight - not, however, because of darkness, but because of a blinding light.

Driven by his desire to see God, Anselm reaches the point of blindness: *"I strive to see more, but I see nothing beyond what I have seen…."*[6] He has seen God and yet has not yet seen him at the same time. It would seem that in his journey to see God, he has finally reached the point of convergence, the vanishing point. However, what makes Anselm's journey a distinguished one is that his motivation is a departure from a human being's sheer innate unquenchable thirst to know. What moves him to seek God is his desire and love for God, his faith that seeks understanding. When Anselm says, *"I seek your face, Lord, it is your face I seek,"*[7] it is not from his sheer capacity to intend towards the object of his knowing, God, but the will that is moved by his desire.

A famous line from Shakespeare is often invoked by lovers who are separated by a great distance. "Absence only makes the heart grow fonder." This line resonates with what desiring is all about: the longing for something that is or someone who is not there and is untouchable, ungraspable, and cannot be seen. It communicates a sense of lacking something that needs to be satisfied, making the heart restless, in Saint Augustine's terms, until it rests in that which will make it complete.

6 Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
7 Ibid.

The unquenchable thirst to know in Saint Anselm, therefore, slides from mere natural correlativity between human intelligence and the intelligible towards another added dimension in knowing that involves the capacity of the will to choose. The capacity to choose opens the person to go beyond the vanishing point, the uncertainty of mystery, and the darkness of not-seeing. In other words, "to know" here is not to grasp and understand as in the Cartesian enterprise but to risk not-seeing despite the striving to see. It is by risking amid not-seeing that one's vision begins to coincide with the disappearance of things from one's view.[8] In short, a person is able to see only in that blinding moment. The all-at-once-revealing-and-hiding is exemplified when God said *"I am who am"* to Moses. It is a divine utterance that escapes the grasp of the human intellect while still letting it know, albeit only partially. The statement *"Sa pagpapakilala ng Diyos, nagtatago ang Diyos"* opens man to the mystery of God - that there is something or someone other than oneself who escapes the grasp of one's understanding. If anything, mystery creates a space of awareness that one is not alone.

Towards the Mystery of the *Other*

A sense of mystery prompts a person's awareness that things known are something-other-than-oneself. This other is uncontainable, at least not completely, within the confines of human categories. For Emmanuel Levinas, it is the person who possesses the radical otherness, who is completely *Other*, and who resists the grasp of the "I."

To comprehend literally means "with grasp."[9] It is the itch

8 Michel de Certeau, "White Ecstacy," in *The Postmodern God*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997), 155-158.

9 The word "comprehend" comes from two Latin words: *cum* which

of human intellect to grasp and assimilate things (or persons), reducing the *Other* within the bounds of the mind's categories. I normally see this in a person's familiarity with another. For example, a dear friend of mine, even after decades of familiarity, continues to surprise me with an unexpected change in temperament or a transformation of behavior, for better or worse. These moments of surprise make me say that I do not know my close friend that well after all. More fundamentally and in a more tangible way, the *Other* exceeds this level of familiarity and is also all-at-once-revealing-and-hiding, and can indeed "surprise"[10] through the very epiphany of the face.[11]

For Levinas, the element of surprise as experienced in the encounter with the face is "straightaway ethical."[12] The face implies that the *Other* is radically separate from me and that this separation is not towards a fusion but a relation: an ethical relation. This is a critique of Heidegger's understanding of the relationship between *Dasein*[13] and the *Other* that is grounded on knowledge. The former, in its isolation, becomes aware of its independence from everything and seeks to escape its solitude.

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translates "together" and *prehendere* which translates "to grasp".

10 In the French language, the word *prise* translates, "taken" while the prefix *sur-* means "above" or "beyond." Hence, the word "surprise" can mean "to be above or beyond being taken or grasped."

11 Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics and Infinity," trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982), 85-92.

12 Ibid.

13 *Dasein* or "being-there"*:* Martin Heidegger's understanding of *being* is fundamentally ontological. Here, *being* is understood as a verb, that is, to exist is "to be." Since existence cannot be shared and is exclusively private, *being* is isolated, at least ontologically. Levinas mentions that "the fact that I exist, my existing, which constitutes the absolutely intransitive element, something without intentionality, without relation." In other words, there is nothing ethical about *"to be."* And so, there is a need to go beyond the ontological understanding of *being* that is isolated in its existence.

The first kind of *being's* exit from its isolation towards the world is through knowledge. However, this escape from solitude eventually goes back to itself as it assimilates objects. Levinas says, "In what concerns knowledge: it is by essence a relation with what one equals and includes, with that whose alterity one suspends, with what becomes immanent, because it is to my measure and to my scale"[14] (One can almost hear Descartes say the same thing about the *cogito's* knowing process). In other words, in this attempt to escape solitude through knowledge, it assimilates the objects, including the *Other,* and makes it the "same"[15] as itself. But there is another way to escape *being's* solitude, and that is sociality.

The escape through a social relationship deposes *being's* dominion over the *Other* because sociality does not only escape isolation, but it escapes *being* itself. Moreover, social relationship recognizes the otherness of the *Other,* who is not the "same," and that resists assimilation through knowledge. Hence, what is social is ethical because here *being* becomes aware of the *being-in-front;* there is the encounter with the *Other.*

The encounter with the face is a reminder that I am a human being with other human beings. There is a completely *Other* outside myself. This *Other* is someone that transcends pure objectivity and, at the same time, ethical because it commands me to be responsible for the *Other.* The face gives a straightforward ethical command, "Thou shall not kill," that prompts a person to act and go against the violent tendency to

14 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982), 60.

15 The term "same" is used by Levinas in the process of knowing as assimilation, that is to say, whatever is known is absorbed by the ego making it the same or equal as itself. Consequently, the *Other* is loses its radical otherness and is reduced to a state of immanence.

conquer the *Other,* so to speak, and fit it in its own measure and scale. And so, the encounter with the face is a de-centering from the ego-centricity of *being* and the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image.[16] Here, the mystery of the *Other* finds another name as the infinite, ever sliding away from the grasp of the finite mind.

The Ascent Through an Ongoing Choice

Where does philosophy, with its task of questioning, ultimately lead me if the inquiry into the existence of things, God, and other people always arrives at a mystery ever-sliding away from my own understanding? Here, the more compelling question for me is: why do I even bother to continue asking when all I get are more questions, and when I find myself even deeper in the darkness of mystery? What is the whole point of the unrestricted drive to know when what is intelligible seems to direct me only towards the receding vanishing point? What is the sense of philosophy and the questions it asks? What is in it for me?

In order to move forward with these questions and not be completely paralyzed by the seeming futility they provoke, I want to establish that philosophy and the act of questioning are indeed inseparable. They are tied to each other inasmuch as the love for wisdom should also mean the love for a type of inquiry caused by fascination and awe that in turn trigger curiosity and attention. Such predisposition can open one to an ongoing meaningful journey. Although one can never fully exhaust the understanding of all of reality, it is not impossible to know reality.

16 Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2005).

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One is not alone and is always a being in a community of beings. It is thus important for the human agent or actor to exercise the power of choice and choose to raise one's vision towards the whole of reality. Here, I would like to express three points:

First, the discipline of questioning in philosophy orients us to the mystery of reality and at the same time, to the awareness that it is not impossible to know that mystery. Knowing is possible, but always only in a perspectival way. This means that human knowing is limited and can never absolutely comprehend anything. The desire to know of the human mind may be unrestricted, but its capacities for understanding are also finite. The human being can only intend[17] to things that reveal themselves gradually within a space-time continuum. For example, the best virologists do not completely understand the COVID-19 pandemic yet, even after more than a year, because it is still unfolding, and all we can do is to patiently wait. Furthermore, knowing will always be influenced by the knower's contingent existence in history. The human knower is a conscious being who is thrown-in-the-world (as Heidegger puts it) at a crosspoint[18] in history where culture and all other societal factors influence the shape of one's understanding. Knowing is not static, not in the sense of imposing meaning on the object, but in understanding from a unique viewpoint. Knowing is dynamic because there is a relationship between the one who intends and the one that unveils.

Since knowing is perspectival, it enriches the meanings of

17 The word "intend" comes from the Latin word *intendere* which means "to stretch/ extend towards" (*in: "*towards" + *tendere: "*stretch")

18 Ramon Reyes, "Man and Historical Action," in *Philosophy of Man: Selected Readings*, ed. Manuel B. Dy, Jr. (Makati City: Goodwill Trading Co., 2001), 105-110.

things. When the "I" questions, such act of questioning is done by and properly belongs to the inquirer alone. In short, I am invited to philosophize because I can bring into philosophy my own unique way of seeing things. My own understanding contributes to and enriches the overall meaning of things in the same way that others can and do. For instance, one poem can generate as many readings and meanings as there are readers and interpreters of it.

Second, the "I" who questions points to a "you." I am a being among other beings: *inter homines esse.* I am a person in relation with others. The *Other* is not a mere object to be examined using the methodologies of the exact sciences so as to shed light on and make known the *Other* in its intelligibility. For the *Other* is also a conscious being who sheds light on me and who affirms that I am also intelligible, that I exist. Furthermore, the ethical impetus in the command "Thou shall not kill" echoes the call to value and respect the *Other's* dignity. The radically *Other* demands respect as the person unravels gradually. Also, the *Other,* who is all-at-once-revealing-and-hiding, demands respect because I can never completely grasp anyone. Hence, I am called to free myself from the urge to contain any person by reducing one to a mere insight or simply use the other for the sake of my ends. Therefore, the respect for human life springs forth from an authentic and deliberate questioning of the "I" who asks, "Who is this other-than-myself?"

Finally, the discipline of questioning embedded in philosophy carries me beyond mystery towards an ascent of the mind through my ongoing choice. Numerous philosophers understand the ambit of reality as the One. Despite the many particulars, there is that which is the source and end of all things and that binds all things. Plotinus elaborates this in

his Neoplatonic worldview of the One and the many through the metaphor of emanation. For him, things flow from God[19] and cascade to a hierarchical order from the most perfect, spiritual realm to the least perfect or the material world. However, there is a reversal of the order in the soul's ascent towards the Source. Plotinus presents the ladder of knowledge where thinking lifts one's thoughts from the least perfect to a higher perfection and a broader reality.

Nevertheless, the genius of existential Thomism's take on metaphysics further explains that the ascent to God is through participation within a universe viewed as an ordered hierarchical community of beings belonging to the same Father.[20] It is in the unrestricted drive of the mind towards things intelligible that one's consciousness is raised to the Source of all existence. Yes, the mind reaches its limits, but it rebounds and transcends those limits through one's capacity to inquire further.

Yet again, there is another kind of participation here. This participation is not that of the analogous kind in the hierarchical order, which is more of a passive one: I am human, and I participate in the whole of reality through my existence as a human being among other beings. But I also participate actively through my choices that ripples throughout the ambit of reality. To act then as a human being is not only to act through passive self-expression and self-communication nor to be "surprised" by the *Other* even without any such intention

19 Plotinus' understanding of a "God" as the One whom everything flows from (Source) is not a God who creates for creation is an act. Since creation involves a movement from potentiality to actuality, it cancels out his concept of God who is absolute unity and pure actuality. God does not do but just *is*. And so, things flow from God out of necessity just as light emanates from the Sun, the ultimate source of light.

20 McCool, *The Universe as Journey*, 255-281.

whatsoever by the *Other*. Above all, to act is to actively and consciously choose. Each choice that I make creates change, even if only like a leaf falling in the middle of a forest, as Khaled Hosseini describes in *The Kite Runner*. It may be a small act, but it is an act that affects and changes the universe in its own way, however small a change this may be.

Hence, the journey of philosophy is not just in its discipline of questioning that raises the mind to higher realities, but also in the act of choosing to do it, choosing to rebound when limits show, and choosing to transcend the abyss of mystery. The human condition is as such: it fluctuates like a river. I know, and I do not know. I grasp, and things slip away from my grasp. I see, and then I see nothing. But each time I encounter mystery, it is not nothingness; it is depth-beyond-me. Choosing to enter that depth does not mean losing sight, but it is what opens me to higher realities whose excess of meaning can be compared to the brightness of the sun, which human eyes cannot directly behold without immediately becoming blinded.

And so, the ascent entails choosing to look at the Sun, as the character in Plato's myth of the cave does. The light of the Sun compels one to contemplate it, but one may choose not to do so because of fear, uncertainty, loss of control, or because one may see it as an unwanted burden of existence. For me, sometimes I see the task of philosophical inquiry as a burden that is as futile as Sisyphus' perpetual task of pushing the rock up the mountain only to start all over again upon reaching the top. But if only Sisyphus would realize that it is *his* rock, not anybody else's, that it is only he who can choose to do that task! He would be able to embrace his rock and choose to do his existential task not because it is a punishment but because he is willing to do it. Only then would his ascent not be an absurd one, but one with meaning. He understands and yet also remains a mystery even to himself.