

## IS LIFE A TRANSCENDENTAL?

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What is “life”? In biology one considers a whole list of properties that are said to distinguish living organisms from inanimate matter: homeostasis, growth, reproduction, and adaptation to environment being among the most important. Scientists talk about a *local reversal of entropy*. A life-form is an entity whose nature sustains itself (temporarily) against the universal rise of entropy, by means of energy drawn from outside itself. All other things, from sub-atomic particles to galaxies (pebbles on the beach being midway between the two), are unable to resist entropy and are inanimate. But the borderline is sometimes hard to draw: on which side do we place viruses, for example, or the hypothetical machines that may one day be able to perform all the functions at present associated with organisms?

Life is a word that we apply only to some things in the world, and not to all. But I want to find some place for an intuition expressed in the following quotation from Christopher Alexander, the British-American architect and designer, in a monumental study called *The Nature of Order*.<sup>1</sup> Alexander believes that “life” is a quality not just of organisms, but of space, and therefore in some sense universal.

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<sup>1</sup> Four volumes, available from the Center for Environmental Structure, at [www.natureoforder.com](http://www.natureoforder.com). See my article on Alexander in *Second Spring*, issue 13 (2011).

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There is a sense in which the distinction between something alive and something lifeless is much more general, and far more profound, than the distinction between living things and nonliving things, or between life and death. Things which are living may be lifeless; nonliving things may be alive. A man who is walking and talking can be alive; or he can be lifeless. Beethoven's last quartets are alive; so are the waves at the ocean shore; so is a candle flame; a tiger may be more alive, because more in tune with its own inner forces, than a man.<sup>2</sup>

Alexander claims that the balance of forces and forms evident in a great cathedral of stone and glass, or in a peaceful garden or courtyard where the light falls just right and the benches are exactly where they are needed, brings something to life by making explicit (actual) something that had been merely implicit (potential) in existence itself. Biological life is the same thing happening at a higher level, more intensively.<sup>3</sup>

Is there, as Alexander suggests, a broader sense of "livingness" in which everything that exists is more or less alive, though in varying degrees? Would a sliding scale or spectrum of "aliveness" enable us to preserve the appropriate distinctions between organisms, machines, and minerals? And would this be this enough to identify "life" as a transcendental property of all being, in the sense given to this term by Christian philosophers?

## THE TRANSCENDENTALS

To become conscious of truth, goodness, and beauty seems to have a lot to do with being human. As far as we can tell, the other animals are lost in the task of being themselves. They do not agonize about who they are or speculate about

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> In his later works, Alexander speaks not only of bringing space to life, but of "awakening space," or bringing it to consciousness. The relationship of life to consciousness is beyond the scope of this paper, but I find it intriguing that when Aquinas tries to define the sense in which God may be said to be "alive" he locates it not in self-motion but in self-knowledge (see below).

why they might be here. Nor do they stand apart from the other creatures in order to give them names, as we do (as Adam does in Genesis and we have been trying to do ever since). Our self-consciousness is part of what gives us our unique capacity for freedom. Man is a speaking animal, a self-reflexive animal, an animal with a certain liberty, and therefore a “metaphysical” animal. To know, to love, to rejoice in another, to rejoice in that which is not the self, is the privilege of one who stands apart, and who is capable of making the distinction between self and other. Thus it was that Etienne Gilson said that man may be defined as a creature “who knows other beings as true, who loves them as good, and who enjoys them as beautiful.”<sup>4</sup>

In any relationship of knowledge, love and joy there is always an intimation of that which transcends us. The experience of “transcendental properties of being” constitutes the dawn of metaphysics, and it takes place in us at a very early age. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, it happens at the moment when we first recognize our mother’s smile. He writes: “The infant is brought to consciousness of himself only by love, by the smile of his mother. In that encounter, the horizon of all unlimited being opens itself for him, revealing four things to him: (1) that he is one in love with the mother, even in being other than his mother, therefore all being is one; (2) that that love is good, therefore all Being is good; (3) that that love is true, therefore all Being is true; and (4) that that loves evokes joy, therefore all Being is beautiful.”<sup>5</sup>

Our humanity is bound up with our capacity to realize that being (and therefore everything that exists, in one degree or another) is one, good, true, and beautiful. When we are brutalized into ignorance of this fact, or denied the experience of it, the taste of it, then we have become somehow less than human.

*Unity*, let’s say, refers to being as it *is*, because everything possesses first an identity with itself. So unity is the property which pertains to the being of something as it is in itself—the property of being itself and not another. The quest

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<sup>4</sup> *Philosophical Experience*, 255.

<sup>5</sup> *My Work*, 114. Balthasar does not address what happens if the mother never smiles. Presumably Being must then find some other way to reveal itself as one, true, good, and beautiful. For further study of these questions, see Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*. Schindler points out (117) that what is revealed in the primordial awakening to love is also a fifth point: the child’s own worthiness of being loved, or the goodness of the child’s being.

for *meaning* is essentially related to this unity, because the meaning of anything necessarily lies in its relation to the whole, or that to which it belongs and in which it participates. In other words, the unity of a thing does not isolate it, but gives it an interior relation to everything else. To the degree that something is a part of something bigger or more complex than itself, its meaning points to that greater whole, and so to the unifying principle that gives that whole its identity. A green leaf, taken by itself, only makes sense if we understand its relation to the tree, and to the sun, the nature of light and the process of photosynthesis, the molecules of which it is composed and where they come from, and the role it plays in the ecosystem. (Similarly, theologians can only make sense of evil and suffering by locating it within a universal plan or the story of salvation, so that its causes become clear along with the part it might play in the healing of the world's order.)

*Truth* is being as *known*. It is concordance with reality, with what is. Perfect truth is perfect concordance, amounting to identity. In this way truth and unity converge. The idea that truth is a property of things and not just of statements (or, to put it another way, that reality is a language in which things are statements or “words”) is important. In a sense, everything that exists is a “word.” An effect reveals the nature of its cause, and so utters a truth about its cause. It is an “expression” of its cause. In fact, it is the expression of the supreme Word, the Logos, which corresponds to being as a whole. You could say it is an echo of that Word, or an answer to it. We are “called into being” by the Word, and addressed by Being. As creatures possessed of a degree of freedom, our behavior will help to determine the extent to which we conform to reality.<sup>6</sup>

*Goodness* is being as *willed*, or as *loved*. To be good is to be desirable, lovable, adorable, admirable. This implicitly refers to the dimension of freedom, of self-determination, just mentioned. Being is good because it is sought, it is the end in which things are fulfilled or completed. It is a resolution of tension, an overcoming of separation. Freedom is the movement of giving, by which the self determines its destiny, and by which it becomes more than it was before, ultimately becoming identified with the transcendent. God, of course, is perfect

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, where this is developed, e.g. 230-37, 251-4, and chapter 5.

goodness because supremely desirable. In God freedom is the same as necessity, because there is no difference between his act of existing and his nature; but in all else, in everything created, there is a tension and a movement between what is and what might be or should be. This is the tension that is the source of all drama, all morality, all sanctity.

What, then, of beauty? Beauty is coherence, harmony, proportion, fulfillment, perfect integration. In comparison with the others, I would say that beauty is being as *enjoyed*, as rejoiced in. This is what Aquinas was getting at with his notion of "pleasingness" in the famous definition "that which, when seen, pleases". When we confront a beautiful scene or object we feel a kind of joy. This joy, I think, always involves a feeling of liberation and transcendence: "wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight," Plotinus writes.<sup>7</sup> Our experience of beauty liberates or expands us beyond the boundaries of the self. The encounter with it arouses the desire to unite ourselves with it in order to become "more" than we are.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it may strike us as "more than we deserve" or more than we have a right to expect.

As properties of all created being, the transcendentals must tell us something about God, since he is their source. Classically, the temptation has been to identify each of them with one of the three Persons of the Trinity. Thus either goodness or unity has been at various times associated with the Father, and truth or beauty with the Son or Spirit. On the other hand, both unity and beauty have been sometimes identified as aspects of the Trinity as a whole. In this game of musical chairs, beauty is often left standing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1:6:4.

<sup>8</sup> At the level of *eros* we recognize that there are two main ways to expand the self by uniting it with a desired beauty. Crudely speaking, the feminine way is to try to receive the beautiful into ourselves, and the masculine way is to try to project the self into the beautiful. At the spiritual level we do both of these things, and the Christian knows that both ways are rooted in God, who both receives himself and gives himself in the three Persons.

<sup>9</sup> Aquinas does not include it in *De Veritate*, Q 1, Art. 1, where he adds *res* and *aliquid* along with *ens* (being), *unum*, *verum*, and *bonum* as transcendental properties. At the end of the article he also argues against the identification of particular transcendentals with one or other divine Person, on the grounds that they are one in reality (unlike, say, wisdom and power), and that their unity in God is even more perfect than their unity in creatures. However, in the

It seems to me that unity, truth, goodness, and beauty each analogously describes the divine nature as a whole, which is found complete and entire and undivided in each of the Persons. We might say, for example, that the self-giving of the Father to the Son and the Son's reception of the divine nature from the Father in the Holy Spirit illuminate the self-identity of each created thing (and therefore its unity), as well as its expressiveness (and therefore its truth), its perfection (and therefore its goodness), and its transcendence (therefore its beauty). Our experience of beauty, then, echoes the infinity of God—the fact that his own being is inexhaustible and therefore he is a continual delight to himself, a source of eternal rejoicing. The joy associated with beauty is our pointer to the depths of being in God. Meister Eckhart once said that “God enjoys himself, and wants us to join him.”<sup>10</sup>

To say the Trinity reveals all these things is to say that Love reveals them, because Love is another name for the Trinity. “Love is thus more comprehensive than being itself; it is the ‘transcendental’ par excellence that comprehends the reality of being, of truth, of goodness,” as Gustav Siewerth puts it.<sup>11</sup>

### LIFE AS A TRANSCENDENTAL

Let us get back to Alexander's intuition, and try to give it a metaphysical expression. If truth is being as known, and goodness is being as loved, and beauty is being as rejoiced in, what is “life”? The question may seem a bit too theoretical, a bit “pointless,” a mere playing around with concepts and definitions, but it is not. As I said, man is a metaphysical animal, whether he realizes it or not. To acknowledge the “transcendentals” is in a way to acknowledge God, or at least to reach out beyond the surface of things towards their ultimate unity and purpose. We are today under enormous mental pressure to regard life as a mere biological, or perhaps even a mechanical, phenomenon

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*Summa*, I, Q. 39, art. 8, he is more flexible. In general he tends to view *pulchrum* as an aspect of *bonum*.

<sup>10</sup> Cited by Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 238.

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Balthasar in *Theo-Logic*, Vol. II, 176-7. The citation occurs in a section of Balthasar's text where he discusses the relationship of the transcendentals to the Trinity.

devoid of deeper significance. What I am trying to get at here is the metaphysical dimension of life, of nature herself. If we can discover that, our whole approach not only to biology, but to architecture and design (Alexander), and perhaps even to ethics, will have to change. (To ethics because modern decision-making is consequentialist and utilitarian, whereas a “transcendentalist” approach would include the dimension of reverence and piety towards being.)<sup>12</sup>

In Question 18 of the First Part of the *Summa*, St Thomas defines life as self-movement, and ranks creatures according to the degree of this ability they possess. On that basis he denies life to minerals and the material elements, which are passively moved by another. But the same definition of life would seem to leave him with a problem. If life is self-movement, God cannot be alive. There is no “movement” in God. He gets around this objection in Article 3 by arguing that there is *understanding* in God, and that understanding is itself *a higher kind of movement*. He concludes: “In the sense, therefore, in which understanding is movement, that which understands itself is said to move itself. It is in this sense that Plato also taught that God moves himself; not in the sense in which movement is an act of the imperfect.”

Perhaps, then, we can broaden the concept of movement in a slightly different way, in order to capture the sense in which, as Alexander puts it, a work of art or a candle flame is “alive.” If God is life in the highest sense, rather than focus on the act of *self-understanding* in order to describe what being alive means for God, we might take a more Trinitarian line and say that, in God “life is *kenosis*.”<sup>13</sup> The whole life of God is self-giving and self-receiving, which (according to certain theologians) is another way of describing the fact that the divine Persons are not substances but subsistent relations.<sup>14</sup> In the perfect act of love, to give is to receive, and to receive is to give. The Father gives everything that he possesses—namely the divine nature—to the Son, but he also receives the

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<sup>12</sup> As Schmitz says in *The Recovery of Wonder* (48), after summarizing the traditional metaphysics, it was the sense even of inanimate things as “deep and luminous” that made their misuse seem terrible.

<sup>13</sup> I owe this formulation to my friend Christopher Mitchell, the Director of the Wade Center at Wheaton College.

<sup>14</sup> Presupposed here is a theology of gift, and of receptivity as a perfection, which has been developed by David L. Schindler among others, though it is far from being universally accepted among Thomists.

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divine nature from the Son, because the love he gives is reciprocated, and if it were not it would not have been perfectly given. The Holy Spirit is both the Father's essence turned into a gift for the Son, and the Son's essence turned into a gift for the Father – the one gift in which the two are united, in which giving and receiving are one. "Spirit is the unity which God gives himself. In this unity, he himself gives himself. In this unity, the Father and the Son give themselves back to one another."<sup>15</sup>

This act of *kenosis*, or circumincession, which is the revealed heart of being and the characteristic "activity" of God, must be reflected analogically throughout the creation. The existence of a thing is a giving of itself, of what it has received, in imitation of the life of God, which is the self-giving of infinity in the pure act of being. To the extent that a thing receives and gives itself, it is "real" and it has a "presence" in the world (it is a thing, different from other things). The world makes room for it, and stands back from it, receives it, and gives to it in return.

The quality of *livingness* that Alexander finds in things, I suggest, is precisely this movement or change welling up from within-although only in the case of animate and particularly conscious animate beings does the creature's own will play a part in that movement. A stone, in other words, possesses a kind of interior life of low degree, which is related to the fact that God creates it from within, not without. It has a nature, into which God breathes existence: it receives the power of self-gift in the measure of its own essence. It plays a part in the whole, and it may be fashioned into a statue or a building whose form is given to it by another. Its degree of aliveness increases depending on the ways in which it receives and gives itself. A beautiful, harmonious pattern contains more self-gift than an ugly or broken one. An animal contains more *kenosis* than a stone, or even a statue.

And of course, a creature that is able not only to grow and to move around but to reflect upon itself, to imagine, to will and know, possesses an even higher or more intensive participation in the activity of God. And only men, with their refusal to give, may fail to be fully what they are or should be, what they are called to be, and fall short of the real. The type of life possessed by creatures

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<sup>15</sup> Ratzinger, "The Holy Spirit as *Communio*," 327.

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such as ourselves, which is not simply to exist passively, and not merely to resist entropy, but to know and to will and to love, implies the possibility of failure or refusal. As Alexander points out in the course of *The Timeless Way of Building*, whereas an atom is “so simple that that there is never any question whether it is true to its own nature,” this is not the case with more complex systems, and most men “are not fully true to their own inner natures or fully ‘real.’ In fact, for many people, the effort to become true to themselves is the central problem of life. When you meet a person who is true to himself, you feel at once that he is ‘more real’ than other people are.”<sup>16</sup> But the perfection of man in the beatific vision signifies that his life is intended eventually to be caught up and identified with the infinitely intense life of the Trinity.

## PARTS AND WHOLES

So far I have broadened the notion of life so that it can apply to everything that exists. As in the case of beauty or goodness, a thing may possess this property in various degrees. A heap of refuse or a bloody corpse is not beautiful, compared to a Greek statue, but some kind or degree of beauty is present in everything. To call beauty a “transcendental” implies that ugliness is simply a deprivation and never reaches absolute zero in anything that exists. The same would have to apply to the quality of livingness, or self-givingness, if this is a transcendental property. And yet the argument up to now, I must admit, is not entirely convincing, probably because the concept “life” feels as if it has been stretched a bit too far for comfort. The next stage of the argument may help to strengthen it.

We need to cease conceiving creatures as isolated and only externally related to each other, and begin to see them as interiorly related (through form and finality, relation and participation) to everything else. Nothing in the world is completely alone. Louis Dupré and others have shown how our modern mentality lost a sense of the interconnectedness of things in the community of being, the “cosmos.” But my own existence implies that of others, and my flesh is

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<sup>16</sup> *The Timeless Way*, 27.

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porous to the influences and elements of the environment around me. In fact it is only for that reason that I am able to live at all, since the war against entropy depends on my not being a closed system. This means that the whole world, in a sense, can be seen as an extension of my own body. The fact that I am alive, and that other creatures are alive, is a function of our connectedness to the world, including the inorganic world.

The inorganic is necessary to the organic; one might even say that it is given a meaning or brought to fruition by the organic, just as the organic (a Christian philosopher might add) culminates in the *personal* and is given a meaning by man. Which is to say, if I may complete this thought, that the world as a whole must be alive if we are alive, since all inorganic elements are parts, more or less remote but nevertheless essential parts, of an organic process. In themselves, of course, viewed in isolation, these elements lack an animating soul. But this is only one way of viewing them. In reality they are part of something much greater, to which we also belong, and this greater whole is alive. We recall that Plato in the *Timaeus* (at 30b) describes the world formed by god as “a living being, endowed thanks to his providence with soul and intelligence.”

An interior relationality binds the whole world together, and this is made explicit in the liturgy of the Church. It is by participating in man as priest of creation, and in his sacrifice perfected in the Eucharist, that all creatures, including the inanimate elements, achieve the fullness of their own being by giving themselves to God and thus sharing his eternal life. Of course, it is important to note that St Thomas, in the first part of the *Summa* (Q. 18, Art. 1), rejects Plato’s idea that the “whole corporeal universe” is in fact “one animal.” One can see why he should do this, and I don’t plan to retrace the arguments here. But he does not take fully into account the intimate dependencies that exist between all things, and which have been explored by modern science. Nor does he give the Divine Liturgy the central role that (Eastern theologians have reminded us) was the perspective of the early Church. We can retrieve Plato’s insight without falling out with Aquinas—especially if we deepen the liturgical perspective even further in the light of eschatology.

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**ETERNAL LIFE**

Briefly put, even if the world as a whole cannot convincingly be said to be “alive” right now, it *will* be alive when it attains its end. It is not alive yet, because the cosmic Fall has introduced death into it. Life—the life of God, that is, Trinitarian life—has not yet been fully revealed. Death has not yet been defeated, except in principle, by Christ. It is the *eschaton* that will reveal the true nature of the world that, right now, is still “groaning” to be born.<sup>17</sup> We might speak of a “personalized” cosmos, a world that through union with Christ becomes a kind of theological person – namely the Church in her cosmic extension. And if the world is, or is becoming, a person, it is also, or is becoming, alive. The Holy Spirit is coming to “renew the face of the earth,” by filling all things with the life of God—and “death shall be no more”.<sup>18</sup>

Life, one might say, is therefore a transcendental of a peculiar sort. It is an “eschatological” transcendental, pertaining to the perfection of all things in God.

Like man himself, the cosmos is an unfinished project, a work in progress, which can only be completed with the cooperation of man, through death and resurrection. The “new heavens and the new earth” reveal the ultimate truth about the world. And this is where I would also see a place for the notion of Sophia, Wisdom, Sapientia, identifying it not so much (with Sergei Bulgakov) as the common Essence of the Trinity, but rather (with Louis Bouyer) as the goal towards which creation tends- God’s objective or purpose in creation. Sophia both pre-exists the act of creation (in God’s foreknowledge), and does not yet exist (in the ever-moving present), and yet is mysteriously present throughout, accompanying the present as a foreshadowing of what will be. As Bouyer says, she is

the glory which was the Son’s at the side of the Father before the creation of the world, a glory the Father bestows on him through his crucifixion in historical time, a glory which the glorified Son will then impart to the faithful when he gives them the Spirit, the Spirit of filiation, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. Or rather, Wisdom

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<sup>17</sup> Rom 8.

<sup>18</sup> Rev 21:4.

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tends through its whole being, in God as in ourselves, toward that divine glory which God gives to no other, but which is nevertheless destined to clothe all things, since all things... derive from the Father through the Son only to return to him in the Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

Wisdom is the glory destined to clothe all things, the Bride of God. So you could say, paraphrasing Irenaeus, that the glory of God is not just a man fully alive, but the personalized *cosmos* fully alive, filled with life because penetrated by God's Holy Spirit. In the light of this destiny, revealed to the eyes of faith and celebrated in the liturgy, we cannot treat nature—our own or anything else's—as we have done in the days of our ignorance, when things seemed to us already dead beneath our hands; for we know that our purpose is to gather them with love into never-ending life.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bouyer, *Cosmos*, 192. Cf. "For wisdom is more moving than any motion: she passeth and goeth through all things by reason of her pureness. For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty: therefore can no defiled thing fall into her. For she is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness" (Wis. 7:24-6, KJV).

<sup>20</sup> In the present paper I have drawn extensively from my forthcoming book, *Beauty in the Word*.

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