

Adventures In Alterity: Wittgenstein, Aliens, Anselm and Aquinas

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The problem in considering alterity is too many avenues of approach! There is the oldest, and perhaps still the most cogent, what might be called the existential. Consider the Other whom Augustine addressed as “more intimately present to me than my innermost being (*Tu autem eras interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*).”¹ Or Luther’s warning to Erasmus to concentrate upon the preached and compassionate will of God, the one proclaimed by the Gospel, rather than the hidden and terrible will of the deity, which would be the subject of any jejune natural theology. The latter, warned the Wittenberg professor, “is not to be inquired into, but reverently adored, as by far the most inspiring secret of the Divine Majesty, reserved for himself alone and forbidden to us.”² Luther was not alone in noting the dark excess of God; Descartes did as well, although, true to the spirit of the Enlightenment, the excess becomes one of light rather than darkness. When he wrote his *Third Meditation on First Philosophy*, Descartes was not proving the existence of God, so much as being personally overwhelmed by it:

I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is, myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired – that is, lacked something – and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there was in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?³

¹ Augustine, *The Confessions* III, 11 in John E. Rotelle, ed. (trans. Maria Boulding), vol. I/1, *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1997), p. 83.

² Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in Helmut T. Lehmann, ed. (trans. Philip S. Watson and Benjamin Drewery), *Luther’s Works*, 56 vols., vol. 33, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 139.

³ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, in Karl Ameriks ed. (trans. John Cottingham), Revised ed., *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 31. Juxtaposing Luther and Descartes, the respective scions of faith and reason, illumines a fundamental feature of philosophic alterity. It is always in inundation of a system; the logical coordinates that form the system are of secondary importance. Thus God may

Examples of existential alterity are abundant for the simple reason that Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, possesses a nuptial character. It proclaims a God who is other than we, whom we are to love in order to know completion of the self. This is why, on the most fundamental levels, apophatic and kataphatic discourses are both centered upon One who is Other; divergence enters when the very possibility of the Other dwelling within discourse is questioned.

Existential examples of alterity are essentially theological and are bound up with the question of praxis. Why? Because, if one believes that there is an Other who addresses us and awaits a response, then one has entered the demanding domain of faith, demanding because an existential response is now required, and theology itself becomes one manifestation of that return rather than mere speculation about the philosophical possibility of a radically Other.

And existential alterity is inescapable even when, in a post-religious age, the Other comes stripped of any patina of piety. How else does one explain our contemporary fascination with aliens? I mean, quite literally, aliens from outer space, the ones mentioned in the subtitle: Wittgenstein, Aliens, Anselm and Aquinas.

Aliens aren't only for adolescents! See the September 2003 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. In the article "E.T. and God" Paul Davies, a professor of natural philosophy at the Australian Center for Astrobiology, at Macquarie University in Sydney, asks if earthly religions could "survive the discovery of life elsewhere in the universe." I find the worry puerile. It could only be posed by a scientific mind that has missed the foundational, nuptial assertion of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic experience. We've always believed that we are not alone!

The fate of revealed religions in the face of extraterrestrial life is a secondary theological consideration. More salient would be an examination of the human predilection for positing an-other. With so little empirical evidence, why are we so willing, even desirous, to assert the possible existence of extraterrestrial others? And one should also ask why the contemporary person finds angels to be incomprehensible and aliens, indisputable! Isn't the intuition of the Other rather apparent in either avatar?

Avenues of alterity come into their own when one leaves the synagogue, the church, and the mosque for the academy. Surely some progressive institution has caught the *Zeitgeist* and now lists alterity itself among its degree offerings. It certainly has a respectable intellectual pedigree, as a glance at the history of philosophy shows.

Post-Cartesian philosophy was premised upon the fissure between Descartes's thinking subject and the, presumably, external world. Of course, Descartes thought the act of presumption lay in positing the

coherently be considered as absolute darkness or light. What counts is the systemic-excess of the absolute.

world. Ironically, we would assert that it lies in the adjective “external,” but that’s leaping ahead in the story. Hume rattled the Cartesian cage by suggesting that the thinking self is nothing more than a bundle of alterities, distinct, monad-like experiences that do not add up to a self, at least not without prejudice. Kant rescued the thinking self by firmly establishing its epistemological unity, but he had to banish ontology in the process. Phenomena we could collate. The noumena were declared irrevocably alien.

Hegel accepted the bifurcation of subject and object in modern philosophy and, for the first time, made conceptual alterity the very vehicle of thought. Reality remained reduced to the knowing subject, but with the assurance that reality was never more than thought thinking itself out. What then, does thought pursue if not something other than itself, the *adequatio rei et intellectum* of Aquinas? Hegel answered that thought pursues itself, and thus becomes itself, through thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

Ironically, alterity comes into its own, philosophically speaking, when Hegel freed thought, the *Logos* of the Greek mind, from the burden of pursuing what the Greeks were convinced stood over and against it, the *Ontos*. To my mind, the *adequatio rei et intellectum* is still the great adventure in alterity, but the explication of that assertion must attend, while the second fulcrum of the modern age, idealism, is examined.

I’ve already suggested that, theologically speaking, existential alterity is inescapable. We are, as Augustine would assert, insatiable beings, condemned or created, to search for that which is other than ourselves. When that alterity no longer plays out *beyond the thinking subject*, then it must fester within the subject, become its own, internal dynamism. Existentially, Hegel is the inevitable consequence of the Cartesian turn to the self.

Almost anything can appear inevitable in hindsight. Post-modernism certainly seems to be the obvious successor to Hegel’s conceptual idealism. If thought pursues only itself, then discourse is nothing more than the self-construction of the thinker, and Nietzsche kindles the fire around which all of post-modern thought swarms, like a moth to the flame. For Nietzsche, nothing limits the project of self-constituting thought, because nothing stands over against that thought. The poet has the final word, and whether that word is caustic or consoling is purely a question of temperament. “Ah, love, let us be true to one another! For the world, which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new, hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain; and we are here as on a darkling plain swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, where ignorant armies clash by night.”⁴

⁴ Matthew Arnold “Dover Beach.”

If, as I will argue, alterity is the absolute fecundity that is humanity, and philosophy skewers itself with a rejection of that which lies beyond the thinking self, then adventures in the alterity of discourse become the only possible projects for contemporary philosophy. The deconstruction of Derrida is premised upon allowing *différance* its voice, because only the paradoxically silent interlocutor can forestall the hegemony of logocentricism. And Derrida is correct. Banish the *Ontos*, and only *différance* can quicken the womb of discourse. As John Caputo notes, “The point of the play of *différance* – and on this point *différance* is to be compared to Wittgenstein’s language games and to Heidegger’s *Unter-Schied* – is precisely to provide for multiple varieties of discourse while delimiting the hegemonic power of the single discourse.”⁵

Mark Taylor is particularly helpful here in distinguishing two contemporary groups of thinkers: those whom he calls “modernist post-modernists,” who revel in Nietzschean freedom and those identified as “poststructural post-modernists,” who are disquieted. I might designate the two as those who deny grace and those who are disturbed by it. Taylor writes:

Modernist post-modernists interpret the ostensible absence of the real as the lack of what we never had in the first place. The real is a chimera fabricated to make us believe that there is something beyond the play of simulacra. Once we have been disabused of this illusion, we are free to enjoy the passing moment. When what is, is what ought to be, there is need for neither critique or resistance. For poststructural postmodernists, the absence of the real is the trace of a lack that can never be overcome. This lack is no simple absence but is instead the elusive margin of difference that allows appearances to appear and disappear. Since a nonabsent absence repeatedly disrupts the present and defers the enjoyment of presence, what is, is never what ought to be. Consequently, critique and resistance are not only possible but unavoidable.⁶

Is the *différance* of Derrida a secularized, apophatic theology, a way of seeking grace in a world without religion? Derrida denies doing negative theology, but that may be a denial that cancels itself.⁷ More to come on this! Let us at least affirm that deconstruction shares the

⁵ John D. Caputo, “God Is Wholly Other – Almost: *Différance* and the Hyperbolic Alterity of God,” in Orrin F. Summerell, ed., *The Otherness of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p. 195.

⁶ Mark Taylor, “Postmodern Times,” in Orrin F. Summerell, ed., *The Otherness of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p. 186.

⁷ See his essays “How to Avoid Speaking,” in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds. (trans. Ken Frieden), *Derrida and Negative Theology*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 73–142; “Sauf le nom,” in Thomas Dutoit, ed. (trans. John P. Leavey Jr.), *On the Name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 35–85; and “Faith and Knowledge” (trans. Samuel Weber), in *Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 1–78.

existential disquietude of Aquinas' dictum that, "concerning God, we cannot grasp what he is, but only what he is not, and how other beings stand in relation to him." Were the Fathers of the Fourth Lateran Council doing deconstruction when they taught that "between creator and creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them?" That brings us back to the question of whether contemporary discourse has sought out the alien because it is embarrassed by the angelic, but that's a negative formulation of the real question, which is properly positive: what dynamism of the human spirit accounts for our perpetual disquietude at what has come before? Why is it, as Emmanuel Levinas puts it, that "one can define the human by the desire for the new and by the capacity for renewal."⁸

The only way to answer that question is to reexamine the foundations of contemporary discourse. Must discourse turn to deconstructualism for fecundity? Is discourse forever severed from *anything* beyond itself, save absence?

I come at that question by way of three thinkers: Ludwig Wittgenstein, who banished the word "Being" from contemporary discourse; Martin Heidegger who made discourse the midwife of Being; and Thomas Aquinas who taught that the self become the self, becomes Being itself, through egress and return (*reditio completa in seipsum*). Talk about an adventure in alterity! First, the frigid, baptismal waters of linguistic analysis!

There are those who continue to read Wittgenstein as cleansing the temple of thought from metaphysical hucksters. They center their attention upon the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921).⁹ There, Wittgenstein was attempting to explicate the relationship between three realms, which, at the time, were presumed to be parallel: thought, language, and reality. It's been called philosophy's most ambitious project, but it seemed essential if science were to be given a firm philosophical foundation. Without knowing the meaning of a word, how can one use that word in the exploitation of reality?

Most people presume that words stand proxy for things in the world, because they've never asked what the words "one" or "two" mean, nor have they tried to answer that question, as Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead did, at the halcyon dawn of the last century, in the, some forty-five hundred, pages of *Principia Mathematica*.

In seventy-four pages, the *Tractatus* broke the log-jam by proposing the picturing theory of language. Nothing stands between words and

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Old and the New," in *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 121. Hereafter as *Time and the Other*.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, (trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1961). Hereafter cited as *Tractatus*. Numbers following the paragraph signs in the text of this article refer to the proposition numbers that Wittgenstein assigned, which do not vary with the editions used.

reality, not even thought itself, which is composed of words. Assertions are true when their arrangement of words parallels the arrangement of objects within the world. We produce all sorts of sentences, like “the King of France is bald” which lead to pseudo-questions like, “How can that sentence make sense when there is no King of France?” Wittgenstein argued that such errors would be avoided when the logical structure of language was made apparent in the rarified language of symbolic logic, where the proper *nomen* would be linked to the correct *nominatum*, the latter being an “atomic element” in reality, presumably one tied to sense experience and hence putative, ostensive definition. Hence in a logical perspicuous language, every word, or symbol, would have a referent in reality. If not, the word was meaningless.

What happens to the word “God” in the *Tractatus*? For a positivist, like Rudolf Carnap and the other members of the Vienna Circle, the answer was simple enough: No referent, no meaning. Wittgenstein, however, wasn’t a positivist. That’s where, what has been called, the mysticism of the *Tractatus* comes into play. The closing propositions of the work make the absolute alterity of God the only sustainable metaphysical proposition. God is that which can never be said, not because God is reality-deficient, but rather because language is anemic to the task.

§6.432 *How* things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world. §6.44 It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists. §6.45 To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole – a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical.

And finally the edict of banishment for kataphatic philosophy and theology, the closing proposition of the *Tractatus*: §7 “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”

Many philosophers misread the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein was not saying that God does not exist. He was asserting that God is not “sayable,” at least not philosophically, precisely because God is radically other than language. Like God, two other things aren’t sayable in the *Tractatus*, not because they lack reality but because, like God, language is premised upon them: the self and logic. Logic can’t be depicted as an element within the world because logic is needed to depict the world (§3.334; §5.552; §5.61), and the self can’t appear as an object within the world because the self must be the one who speaks the world of language (§§5.631-5.641). God does not appear within the world because the world is limited by something other than itself. Of course a positivist would want to argue that the world is not limited by anything. The world is simply all there is. Wittgenstein’s response is, properly speaking, an existential intuition of alterity in a

work of analytic philosophy. “*Feeling* the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical.”

Most practitioners of natural theology, more than a little depressed at having been, at least intellectually, laid off with the closing words of the *Tractatus*, perk up considerably when they consider the only other published work of Wittgenstein, his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).¹⁰ They shouldn’t! Only a small number of philosophers find themselves in agreement with Wittgenstein’s own assertion that there is an essential continuity between the two works. Most find them as different as the old and new testaments of Christianity. The former seems to limit language to empiricism, while the latter appears to give warrant to a radical antifoundationalism with the assertion that language is “all there is.” If we can comprehend Augustine’s dictum that “The New Testament is latent in the Old; the Old Testament becomes patent in the New,” surely we can make some sense of Wittgenstein’s enigmatic assertion that he would like someday to see his two works published in the same volume with the epigraph, “It’s generally the way with progress that it looks much greater than it really is.”¹¹

In many ways the *Investigations* do dismantle the edifice that is the *Tractatus*. The picturing theory of language is jettisoned in favor of “meaning as usage (§43).” The meaning of a word is its usage, not an object in reality, not even an occult one, like an essence (§116). Words take their meaning from the context of their employment, what Wittgenstein called their *Sprachspiel*, their language game. Logic is no longer transcendental; it’s language game-dependent (§81).

The second testament of Wittgenstein is good news, in a limited way, for the practitioners of theology. Words are freed from the onus of seeking a putatively empirical referent. Today, even the words employed by a scientist would be unable to meet that criterion of validity. The problem for theology, however, is how to show, post-Wittgenstein, that its words do anything more than express the intentional interiority of the speaker. Is the meaning of all theological discourse simply an act of self-expression? Is what we say about God only a way of saying something about ourselves?

This is a major impediment to the nuptials of otherness, because every artist of alterity wants to assert the presence of something over, and beyond, language. The problem for one schooled in the *Philosophical Investigations* is that every *assertion of alterity* appears to

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein (trans. G.E.M. Anscombe), *Philosophical Investigations*, 3 ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967). Hereafter cited as *Investigations*. Numbers appearing with the paragraph sign in this article refer to the section numbers assigned by Wittgenstein, which also do not vary with editions used.

¹¹ Evelyn Toynton, “The Wittgenstein Controversy,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1997, pp. 28–41, at p. 40.

be nothing more than a language game. It simply pings around the room of language like the ball in a game of racket ball. Being implies non-Being because “non” is the great paddle of logic. Whatever meaning “non-Being” might possess is dependent upon the meaning of Being. Language never exits itself. The discourse of alterity faces this rub: once you name the Other, as Being, as Non-Being, even as “Other,” you have already done what you do not want to do, which is to assign the Other a place within the world, within the world that is discourse.

To illustrate, follow the futility of Derrida. He correctly rejects his phenomenological roots, arguing that phenomenology cannot arrive at the desired *epoche*, because it cannot shed the skin of metaphysical construction. Language imposes Kantian-like transcendentals upon the very act of perception. Hence there is no getting around discourse, nothing beyond the simulacra. For Derrida, fecundity can only arrive with the rupture of the linguistic system.

True enough, but the question I think Wittgenstein would pose to Derrida is whether or not deconstruction is itself anything more than a language game, and not a particularly attenuated, or fruitful, one at that! To the extent that every language game is a metaphysical system *in nuce*, one can systematically negate every nexus of any such system, like a virus deleting software. But have you really done more than to discover the primordial language game, that anything can be negated in language? Is an inverted system any less architectonic? Does placing the word “not” in front of logocentric free us from logocentrism? I am not saying that deconstruction as a project is devoid of fertility. Inversion can produce insight. A man who sees his hair parted in a photo suddenly realizes that he is not the very same fellow he sees each morning in the mirror.

As Caputo notes, philosophical versions of alterity never truly escape what he calls the law of textuality. For example, when we say that God is wholly other:

It is important first, however, to insert the assertion into the chain for it to work, important first to weave the concatenation that is going to be ripped up, to create the tension that is going to be burst, to set up the measure and the horizontality that is going to be exceeded, to establish the cool and sober *ratio* that will be interrupted by an instant of divine madness. . . . On this account, saying “God is wholly other” is a textual operation, a work of hyperbolic excess, that depends upon its textual, contextual base, a piece of hymnal, holy excess.¹²

If language cannot exit itself, then perhaps we should ask if one must go out of the self to find the other. Perhaps not. In that most

¹² John D. Caputo, “God Is Wholly Other – Almost: *Différance* and the Hyperbolic Alterity of God,” in Orrin F. Summerell, ed., *The Otherness of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 190–191.

empirical *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein suggested that there is a lot of truth in solipsism, “for what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but makes itself manifest. The world is *my* world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of *language* (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of *my* world (§5.62).”¹³ To say that the world is reduced to the self is wrong, because it suggests that the world has no exponential potency, but it is also profoundly correct because the world never exists *beyond* the self. It is always *my* world. What would it mean to speak of a world that is not mine?¹⁴ Yet to fail to speak some word that at least evokes the Other would be to suggest that the world, of which human discourse speaks, or better, which is incarnate in human discourse, is essentially static. And that is what the alterist, whatever the avocation, must reject! One can choose to speak of the One beyond the world or the One inherent within the world. *Sprachspielweise*, it doesn’t matter if God be absolutely transcendent or immanent, just as it doesn’t matter that one conceive the self as being coextensive with the world. What matters is the existential positing of dichotomy that finds expression in language. We are not alone!

In the *Tractatus*, the Other could not be asserted within language because it had no referent within the world. In the *Investigations* the world itself has become language. One can *say* whatever one desires, but desire alone does not shed the skin of language because language is not skin, not the clothing of thought, it’s the very tissue of reality. Language is all there is. We have returned with Sisyphean sorrow to Kierkegaard’s lament, “This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.”¹⁵

That great sage of alterity, Anselm of Canterbury might suggest that we drop to our knees, not in despair, but in adoration, because, like Augustine, Luther, and Descartes, we may have finally *felt* the transcendence of God. The saint didn’t set out to prove the existence of God. In the eleventh century, God’s existence seemed self-evident. Everybody believed in God; back then, an unbeliever meant someone who believed in the wrong God!¹⁶

¹³ *Tractatus*, 57.

¹⁴ Note the affinity between Wittgenstein and contemporary phenomenology on the self and *its* world. The one is the necessary construction of the other. Hence Levinas, “By encompassing everything within its universality, reason finds itself once again in solitude. Solipsism is neither an aberration nor a sophism; it is the very structure of reason. This is so not just because of the ‘subjective’ character of the sensations that it combines, but because of the universality of knowledge – that is, the unlimitedness of light and the impossibility of anything to be on the outside.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 65.

¹⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments / Johannes Climacus*, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Princeton, 1985), 37. Hereafter *Philosophical Fragments*.

¹⁶ In treating Anselm, I am greatly indebted to the essay of John Clayton, “The Otherness of Anselm,” in Orrin F. Summerell, ed., *The Otherness of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

What spurred Anselm's thought was a passage he would have encountered regularly in the psalms that he prayed as a monk. "*The fool says in his heart, there is no God* (Ps51:1)." The question puzzling Anselm wasn't the unbelief of his contemporaries. It was the fact that sacred scripture itself suggested the very possibility of unbelief. How is it possible, even for a fool, not to believe what seemed to him to be so self-evident? What does it mean to think outside the boundaries of thought? What does it mean for thought to have boundaries?

Most undergraduates are never assigned to read the meditative, first chapter of Anselm's *Proslogion*, where the monk prays: "O Lord, I do not attempt to gain access to Your loftiness, because I do not at all consider my intellect to be equal to this [task]. But I yearn to understand some measure of Your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that unless I believe, I shall not understand."¹⁷

Anselm is not saying that unaided reason can find God. We haven't yet understood the meaning of the word God, if we think that God is something to be found, like an HIV vaccine or aliens in space. Another way of saying the same would be to assert that anything that fits neatly into the world can't possibly be the God who created the world. The search for God is not about reason finding an object of study. Though the search is not irrational, its very nature demands – not a cessation of reason, not even a bracketing of reason, but rather – the flush of reason caught short before the face of Sartre's Other.

Anselm rightly realizes that he will never find God, unless God in mercy should choose to reveal himself. Sartre didn't have it completely right; Levinas goes deeper by insisting that the look of the Other (*Autrui*) can empower as well as paralyze. The Other constitutes the self by birthing a future, a history. The monk addresses his future, one revealed in a face that sees but cannot be seen. "Furthermore, by what signs, by what facial appearance shall I seek You? Never have I seen You, O Lord my God; I am not acquainted with Your face. What shall this Your distant exile do? What shall he do, O most exalted Lord? What shall Your servant do, anguished out of love for You and cast far away from Your face? He pants to see You, but Your face is too far removed from him."¹⁸ The presence of the Other immediately reconstitutes the self, and that process begins with self-examination. "My soul strains to see more; but beyond what it has already seen it sees only darkness . . . Is the eye of the soul

¹⁷ Anselm of Canterbury *Proslogion* in Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, trans., *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury* (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000), p. 93.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

darkened as a result of its own weakness, or is it dazzled by Your brilliance?"¹⁹

Either option is possible, and Anselm chooses both; as Descartes would echo, the self is only to be known in relationship to the Other: "Surely, the soul's eye is both darkened within itself and dazzled by You. Surely, it is darkened because of its own shortness of vision and is overwhelmed by Your immensity; truly, it is restricted because of its own narrowness and is overcome by Your vastness. For how great that Light is from which shines everything true that illumines the rational mind!"²⁰

And that's when Anselm writes those famous words, "Therefore, O Lord, not only are You that than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are also something greater than can be thought."²¹ If the self cannot be contained within language, neither can that which constitutes the self by standing over it. Anselm finally arrives at the absolute otherness of God. God cannot dwell within the world anymore than the self can be considered an object within the world.²² God implodes the horizon of human life.

Before leaving alterity, let's find our bearings. It is not the task of the theologian to prove alterity, and for two reasons. First, because, by definition, alterity stands beyond proof. Were it subject to proof it wouldn't be alterity.²³ Secondly, because the theologian has *felt* alterity, better yet, let us say that he or she has *known* alterity, lest one appear to reduce the experience to an affect, though the latter Wittgenstein would argue that affect precedes affirmation. All acts of positing, all language games, come out of lived experiences, which are not distilled into rational, emotive, and corporal components. Phenomenologists like Husserl and Heidegger correctly insisted that it is always the task of thought to evoke the full gamut of lived experience, not truncate it by intellectual fiat. We are Anselm's heirs. We do not seek understanding as a prelude to faith; on the contrary, we believe in order to understand.

What we are trying to do is to make our own experience of alterity comprehensible to contemporaries. We are not trying ostensibly to define alterity. If alterity were something capable of being limited, *some thing* capable of being limited, that might be possible. But the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Tractatus*, 57–58.

²³ As Wittgenstein showed in the posthumous collection of his notes, G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, eds., *On Certainty* (trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe), (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), all proof takes place within a system. Outside a given system, skepticism is literally meaningless. Trying to use language to prove the existence of God beyond language would do no more than to theologially assert that "a" implies "¬a," but existence is not a predicate, as Kant showed.

experience of alterity is as unique as the individual, and, for all the communion that language makes possible, we cannot hand our very selves over to another. Something always eludes the process. There is an inestimable depth to the self, which is why Wittgenstein asserted that it stands beyond language. If sheer depth of fecundity forecloses handing over the self, it surely precludes the passing-over-to-another of alterity.

But if the language game of alterity alludes to an experience that is self-constituting of the human person, then, if one is a good shepherd of language, one can hope to show to an interlocutor that one is evoking an experience that is not foreign. Indeed, as Heidegger would suggest, it is only because of its sheer, overwhelming presence that it precludes attenuation.

Nor will evocation provoke the Other to show itself. If that were possible, the Other would cease to be the Other. But if the Other is, in the words of Augustine “more intimately present to me than my innermost being,” perhaps a careful shepherding of language will allow our fellows to see themselves for the first time, to see themselves as constituted by what Aquinas called an admixture of potency and act.

Something has been given to us, but *some no-thing* remains to be given. The linguistic ability to designate *some thing* is dependent upon the *some* that envelops the *thing*. The Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* thought that language could perfectly map what is. Aquinas would correct him by saying that it could only map that which is *in act*. And then he would ask, “But what of potency?” Levinas, echoing both Heidegger and Aquinas, quite correctly insists that in evoking alterity we are not seeking a substantive but a verb, because being is primordially activity.

In evoking the anonymity of this existing, I am not at all thinking of the indeterminate ground spoken of in philosophy textbooks, where perception carves out things. This indeterminate ground is already a being (*un être*) – an entity (*un étant*) – a something. It already falls under the category of the substantive. It already has that elementary personality characteristic of every existent. The existing that I am trying to approach is the very work of being, which cannot be expressed by a substantive but is verbal. This existing cannot be purely and simply affirmed, because one always affirms a *being (étant)*. But it imposes itself because one cannot deny it.²⁴

The Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* discovered that language is the very womb of potency! For every word that emerges, some word, from which it has sprung, is now entirely newly made.²⁵ A new dichotomy exists, one premised upon a new unity, and not one

²⁴ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 47–48.

²⁵ Think: blue, green, blueish green, blueish blue green.

of these three elements is left untransformed, not the new word, the old word, or their now-briefly-exposed horizon. The new word is, of course, new, but since words derive meaning from usage, and usage is relational, the other two elements also find themselves resurrected into a new form. This assertion of transcendence, coming from linguistic analysis, is nevertheless akin to that of Heidegger's predilection for poetry as the preeminent form of language, as the place of clearing, where *what-is-to-be*, ceaselessly reveals itself.

Aquinas might confidently shift the dialogue from linguistic analysis to existentialism by reminding us that we are the only creatures on earth who know themselves to be limited and who define themselves as a project awaiting completion. The existential meaning of his *reditio in seipsum completa* is the Judeo-Christian-Islamic assertion that we cannot be ourselves without ceaselessly completing ourselves in something other than the self. The phrase, as first used by him, was an epistemological formulation characterizing conceptual, sensory-based intellects.²⁶ Its meaning expands from epistemology to existentialism when it is linked to his well known definition of the human person as *quoaddammodo omnia*, in some ways everything.²⁷ It was a task brilliantly executed in Karl Rahner's *Spirit in the World*.²⁸

We are potency seeking actualization. Hence our existential need to encounter the self in the other. It explains the drive in Western thought to seek out the East; it sets the agenda of inter-religious dialogue; it evokes the human need to refashion the self in the guise of the other so as to discover the self. Christ was not a Hobbit, but a Christian will know him, and Calvary, more fully by following Frodo up the slopes of Mount Doom. If language is usage, resetting any tessera produces a new mosaic, a new icon of the Christ.

Today, Heidegger's ontological difference usefully liberates Aquinas' word "Being" from consideration as the collective totality of those things that exist in the world. The Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* would have correctly asserted that this totality cannot be designated; it is simply a function of logic. The class of all classes is not itself a class. It is not another element within the world.

But if one understands Heidegger, one might as well employ the word Non-Being as Being, because what one is seeking to evoke is not some "thing" but the utter fecundity at the heart of the human experience of all things. The choice of words, "Being" or "Non-Being" is negotiable. "Non-Being" at least stops the positivist from looking about the room. What language is evoking here is its own potency, its nuptial dynamism, its drive to complete itself in something other

²⁶ *S.C.G.* IV, 11.

²⁷ *S.C.G.* III, 112 and frequently elsewhere.

²⁸ Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968).

than self. When Wittgenstein asserted that “It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists,” he was drawing his own existential line between potency and act. He was signaling his appropriation of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic doctrine of creation which, translated into subsequent philosophy, is Heidegger’s resuscitation of the Ancient Greek wonderment that there is something rather than nothing at all. Existentially, something similar is going on in Heidegger, in Wittgenstein, and in the creation-centered spirituality, which animated Aquinas’ metaphysics. Kierkegaard expressed it well when he wrote, “This *passion* of thought is fundamentally present everywhere in thought, also in the single individual’s thought insofar as he, thinking, is not merely himself.”²⁹

When this is understood, one knows that the word “world” for Wittgenstein suggests that which “Being” evokes in Heidegger and “Act,” in Aquinas: the nuptial Other. That we yearn for angels and aliens does not prove their existence anymore than desire for God proves God’s, but the question that the believer and the non-believer can now quietly contemplate is the meaning of human existence, that open-ended question that cannot know closure without coming to rest in something outside itself.

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²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 37. (My italics)