

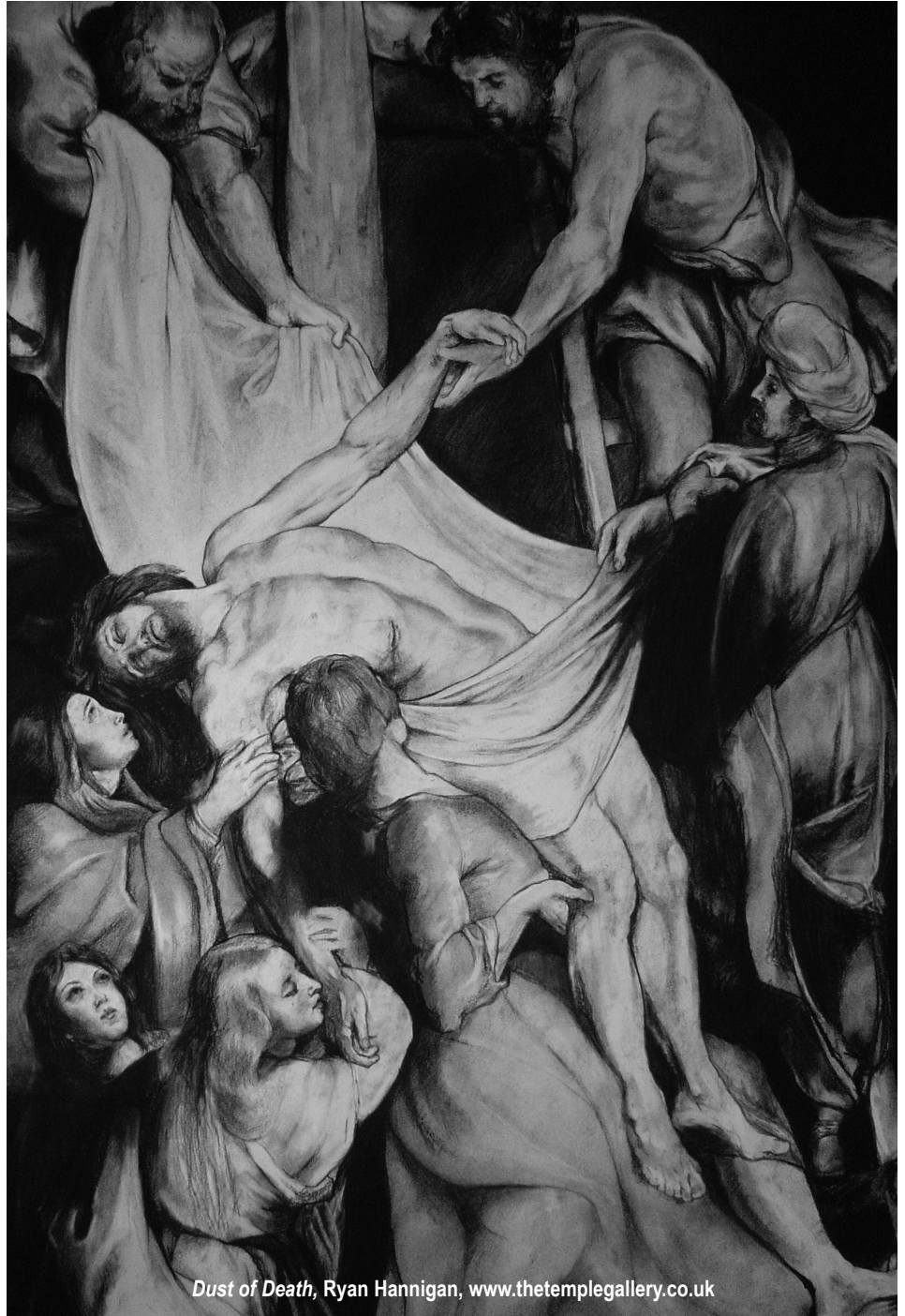


From Dust and Ashes to the God Above

By William Dunn

One way in which we can divide philosophers is into two groups: those who say that mind precedes matter, and those who say that matter precedes mind. The first group holds that behind the material realm there exists a separate mind which caused everything to spring into existence, and our own minds are sparks of this divine mind which set us apart from all other material creatures. The second group of philosophers denies the existence of a greater mind, and holds that matter is the ultimate reality. They maintain that if only we could understand the essential natures and properties of the fundamental particles out of which all things are made, and the laws which govern them, then we could fully understand every aspect of reality. They maintain that our own minds are nothing more than our brains, and all of our thoughts are mere *epiphenomena* of matter. I think that it is especially to this second group that the words of Shakespeare's Hamlet can be applied when he said to his friend: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle recounts for us the history of the Greeks' first attempts at understanding the ultimate cause of all things. These earliest philosophers were the first materialists in the Western tradition, who sought to understand the primary matter out of which all things were made. Thales, for example, thought it was water, for Heraclitus it was fire, for Democritus it was a variety of uncuttable "atoms", and so forth. This early group of thinkers made many important contributions to philosophy, but none of them could clearly grasp the concept of mind. But as Aristotle goes



Dust of Death, Ryan Hannigan, www.thetemplegallery.co.uk

on to explain: "Then there arose one who stood out like a sober man amongst a chorus of drunks." He was referring to Anaxagoras, who was the first Greek philosopher to realize that the ultimate cause of all things must be a separate *Nous*, or Mind. Anaxagoras began that line of thinkers who recognize the separation of mind from matter.

It is natural for unaided reason to begin by trying to understand the material cause of things within our sense experience before advancing to the more difficult concept of Mind as the ultimate cause of everything, and there is after all much truth in saying that matter is a beginning of things. Every Ash Wednesday we are reminded that our bodies must return to the dust from which they came. It is also fitting for Revelation to begin with the ultimate beginning of all created things, both material and immaterial, as we find in the opening words of Genesis, where God is revealed as the first efficient cause of the universe. But it is both unnatural and unfitting to revert to an error which had long since been corrected, as we in fact find among the modern materialists who proclaim anew that all things are merely material. Although Marx himself never used the expression, later Marxists frequently referred to Marxism as dialectical materialism, which was seen as an inversion of the Hegelian dialectic which had recognized the primacy of spirit, albeit in a very confused and distorted way. Marx, and those who descended from him, understood the fundamental basis of all Marxist philosophy to be a radical materialism which entirely rejects the spiritual realm. Although Marx is commonly remembered only for his economic and sociological theories, these were only consequences of his deeper materialism. Ironically, the ultimate cause or foundation of the materialist mistake is not to be found within the material realm, but rather within a realm which is entirely spiritual. For as St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians: "We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present dark-

ness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

It would be helpful to recall the larger theological context in which the particular drama of man is seen to unfold. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that God, who has been revealed to us as Love itself, chose to create not in order that He Himself might have an increase in happiness, since this would be impossible to one whose perfection and happiness were already limitless, but rather in order to enable other beings to participate in His eternal joy. But although no creature can become God, all creatures do in fact resemble God at least in some way, since each is a partaker in being itself, the fullness of which resides in God. For Aquinas, the plenitude of God's being was

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the primary message of the mysterious voice within the burning bush encountered by Moses, and St. Paul would later say: "through Him we live, and move, and have our being." Since God is supremely one, His being is one with His love, and through His love He created our universe with a marvelous hierarchy of creatures whose individual perfections added together more closely resemble the perfection of His own being. In this grand symphony the lower is always ordered to the higher, so that the material realm is made to serve the spiritual realm, the lower angels serve the higher angels, and the whole creation is ordered to God as to its final end. An interesting mirroring of this order was to be found in the ancient imperial orb and crown of the Holy Roman Emperors. Both orb and crown were surmounted by a blue gem which signified the final beatific vision of God. The role of the Emperor was to help direct the temporal realm of the state to the highest

destiny set forth by the Church. So sang the beautiful bells of Christmas in the year 800, but between the blue gem and the orb and crown was to be placed the heavy burden of the Cross.

Although the number of merely material beings is vast, Aquinas held that the number of purely spiritual beings is far greater. But among the vast array of creatures there is one which is wholly unique, who is formed from both matter and spirit: man himself. It is at this nexus of the material and spiritual realms that the greatest battle is fought. For after the dark angels fell at the beginning of all things, they resolved to seduce the parents of our race in order to lead them into their own darkness. As we know from the Book of Genesis, the serpent in the garden promised Adam and Eve the power to become like God, but after falling prey to his spell they instead became subject to death in which their bodies returned to the dust from which they came. By falling into the temptation to become more than we are, we were betrayed into becoming less than we are. But if by this first lie we were led to believe that we could become like the God who is pure spirit, by a second lie we have been led to believe that we are *only* matter. Both lies endeavor to destroy that which is truly human.

St. Thomas explains that when God first created us we were established in the state of "original justice", in which the lower was harmoniously subordinated to the higher in a perfect order. The material realm was made subject to us so that we could use it freely, while our body and its passions were perfectly subordinated to our higher faculties of mind and will, which were in turn perfectly subordinated to God. Original sin consisted in the reversal of this order of original justice. After our higher faculties rebelled against God, our lower faculties were made to rebel against our reason and will as a form of punishment, and we became slaves to the material realm. St. Augustine first defined peace as the "tranquility of order". Through the disruption of the order of original justice our peace with God and with ourselves was lost as we became embroiled in a more

ancient war between the fallen angels and God. This is the theological root of the epochal vision found within the literary works of J. R. R. Tolkien.

Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle saw that there are basically three kinds of goods about which all human legislation and ethical enquiry are concerned: the goods of the soul such as wisdom and moral virtue, the goods of the body such as pleasure, health, and beauty, and finally the external material goods. These philosophers thought that disagreement was to be found between themselves and the majority of other men not with regard to *what* the basic goods of life are, but rather with regard to which of them holds greater importance. Most men pursue bodily and material goods above the goods of the soul, and will seek to advance the mind only to the extent necessary to obtain these lesser goods. But these philosophers held that we should pursue external and bodily goods only to the extent necessary to obtain the higher goods of the soul.

Since man's war is not primarily against man, but rather against spirits, thrones, and dominions, no mere man could ever lead mankind to victory in such war; only the God made flesh could conquer that which is not flesh. It is in the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity that we find the true champion in this battle for mankind, and he has provided us with three powerful weapons to restore us to the three-fold order in which we were created. These weapons are the three evangelical counsels of poverty, obedience, and chastity, which the Church calls everyone to live at least in spirit, if not by vow. For through obedience our minds and our wills are once again made subject to God, through chastity our bodies and bodily passions are made subject to our minds and wills, and through poverty we are freed from our slavery to the material realm. We are enabled to follow these counsels by the divine grace which flows through the Sacraments. Aquinas explains that the word religion (*religio* in Latin) is derived from *religare* which literally means "to bind back". Christ was sent as our great Mediator, and through Him we

are reunited to God from whom we became separated after the Fall. Aristotle once wrote that where there is truth all things harmonize. Here we find a wonderful harmony between the teachings of the pagan Greek philosophers regarding the three basic goods of every human life, and the teachings of Christ regarding the three evangelical counsels. Christ as the divine Logos is the very Wisdom of God, and so also the true source of all merely human wisdom.

Although the best of modern science seeks simply to see more clearly the order and arrangement of the universe in which we live, modern science must trace much of its origin to Francis Bacon, who proclaimed that the speculations of the ancients were mere castles in the sky, beautiful to behold

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but productive of nothing. He sought to lay a new foundation for modern philosophy and science, but in doing so fell prey to the ancient temptation for power. No longer was science to be pursued in order to understand nature, but rather to conquer nature. But as C. S. Lewis has rightly pointed out, the final frontier in this line of endeavor must be human nature itself, and since science is only equipped to help us understand the material realm, once man tries to understand himself through science alone, he becomes falsely reduced to mere matter.

It should be acknowledged that much is owed to the Baconian project, since it has led to technologies which have helped to free us from our bondage to bodily hunger and disease. But we must be wary of the temptation to power which so often accompanies modern science. St. Thomas teaches that the greatest cause of deception is likeness to the truth: this is why the highest of angels became the father of lies after his ter-

rible fall into darkness, because he was closest to God by nature. When he first tempted us to become like God there was an element of truth in his words, since God Himself had said: "let us make man in our own image and likeness" before creating us and setting us over the material world. And Christ exhorted us to a God-like perfection when He said: "Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect". But to be made to share somehow in the divine life is possible only by God's power, and man's lust for power inevitably leads to the death of man. Only by submitting our minds and wills to God can we truly know ourselves and our place in that hierarchy which spans the cosmos from the smallest grain of dust to the highest angel. The whole of creation is sustained in every moment of its being through participation in the being of God, who alone is being itself, or *ipsum esse* in Aquinas' writings. If God were to remove His sustaining power even for a moment, the seemingly boundless cosmos would simply be "melted into air, into thin air . . . leaving not a rack behind", as Shakespeare's Prospero would say. St. Thomas teaches that to grasp fully the mystery of creation would require us to comprehend fully the mystery of God, but even the blessed in Heaven can never do this. For this reason St. John of the Cross could truly say that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves, forever dwelling within depths of our souls which we shall never be able to reach. The thunderous chorus of Heaven is forever sustained in its song by the One whose unfathomable being it shall never cease from praising. Truly there are more things in Heaven and earth than we shall ever dream.

William Dunn converted to Catholicism while a student at Thomas Aquinas College. After completing his B. A. at TAC, he went on to earn his Master's and Licentiate degrees in Sacred Theology at the International Theological Institute in Gaming, Austria. For the past three years he has taught classes in philosophy, theology, and Medieval Latin in Houston, TX, and is presently working to complete his Doctorate in Sacred Theology through the Angelicum in Rome.