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ON “THE CONTINGENCY OF OUR OWN BEATITUDE.” SOME REFLECTIONS ON GILSON’S “THE FUTURE OF AUGUSTINIAN METAPHYSICS”

But now the suffering also had been made present to him in an amplitude beyond the reach of his mind. He would never know even the extent to which its suffering had been unnecessary. It seemed to him almost proof of immortality that nothing mortal could contain all its sorrow. He thought, as we all have been taught to think, of our half-lit world, a speck hardly noticeable among the scattered lights in the black well in which it spins. If all its sorrow could somehow be voiced, somehow heard, what an immensity would be the outcry!

—Wendell Berry¹

But this means, quite beyond speculations about the nature of truth and its metaphysical conditions, a sort of moral dialectic that, taking as object of its search the search itself by man of God, endeavors to show the presence in the heart of man of a contingency much more tragic and disturbing than that of the universe, because it is the contingency of our own beatitude.

—Étienne Gilson²

I

Étienne Gilson’s essay on “The Future of Augustinian Metaphysics” was published in 1930 on the occasion of the fifteenth centenary of Augustine’s death in 430 A.D. I recall reading this essay probably sometime after the publication in 1957 of *A Gilson Reader*, in which it was reprinted. This essay has always existed somewhere in the back of my mind. So it is a particular pleasure to recall it here as I have long desired to look

¹ Wendell Berry, “A Place in Time,” in *A Place in Time: Twenty Stories of the Port William Membership* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012), 236–237.

² Étienne Gilson, “The Future of Augustinian Metaphysics,” in *A Gilson Reader*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image, 1957), 102.

at it again. The essay is, in part, a polemic with the heritage of Descartes on the starting point of philosophy, on whether we begin in things or in the mind—the “si fallor, sum” of Augustine and the “cogito ergo sum” of Descartes. Though he considered them both to be rooted in realism, Gilson also contrasts the Thomist approach through *what is* with that of Augustine through the mind and truth. He is at pains to maintain that Aquinas had the more complete philosophy. But he recognized that Aquinas was himself a devoted reader of Augustine, none better. I recall hearing a lecture of Gilson once in which he insisted that the beginning point of philosophy was the affirmation: “There are things and I know them.” He warned about trying to prove this known fact from something clearer. Nothing was more clear.

The most famous passage in all of Augustine’s vast works is, no doubt, from the *Confessions*—“Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”³ (Why does that passage sound so much better if we use “Thee’s” and “Thou’s”?) And, of course, this passage in turn is mindful of the two cities vying for our attention—the City of God and the City of Man, wherein we seek our ultimate rest. We also read this very Augustinian passage in the Second Book of *The Imitation of Christ*, of Thomas à Kempis: “You have here no lasting city. For wherever you find yourself, you will always be a pilgrim from another city. Until you are united intimately with Christ, you will never find your true rest.”⁴ In each of these passages, our actual lives, even at their happiest, are depicted as still unsettled. In a sense, the whole dynamism of the universe is grounded on this primary fact. Augustinian metaphysics, Gilson will hold, begins with this existential fact, itself a real event in the real universe of each of us in our time in this world.

Originally, I had entitled this article: “Habits without Metaphysics.” This separation between ethics and metaphysics was the basis of my approach to Gilson’s essay on “The Future of Augustinian Metaphysics.” Later, however, I pondered the remarkable passages from Wendell Berry and from Gilson himself that I cited in the beginning, and I decided that the present title—“On the Contingency of Our Own Beatitude”—was a better one to bring out the point I had in mind with regard to the relation of habits to metaphysics.

³ St. Augustine, *Confessions* I, 1: PL 32, 661.

⁴ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 2, 1.

“But just what was the point you had in mind?” one might inquire. Some of it, at least, has to do with Berry’s remark about the “extent to which this suffering [in the world] had been unnecessary.” Aquinas, citing no less an authority than Augustine himself, had inquired about God’s permission of evil. Augustine had said that God would only allow evil if, in allowing it, some greater good could come about. A world in which sin happened because of freedom was also a world in which sorrow, repentance, and mercy could operate. The Incarnation itself took place through this latter route. Evidently, a universe in which sorrow can exist is “better” than one in which it does not exist. It reveals to us more of what God is really like.

I have, in any case, long been convinced of the superiority of Aristotle’s emphasis on virtue over the modern notion of “rights” as the core of ethical and political things. Virtues emphasize what we freely do to acquire them. “Rights” stress what someone else has to do for us. It is true that the world itself and we in it are things that someone else has done for us. Existence itself is a gift, not a “right.” If it were a “right,” God cannot be God, the God who was also free not to create. In our case, however, since we need not exist, our ‘beatitude’ is contingent even for God.

This latter fact, however, does not lessen God’s omniscience but enhances it. A voluntarist theology, however, maintains that such a lack does lessen God. God, the voluntarist claims, is not “free” to make evil good or good evil. Thus, in this reasoning, God is not all powerful. He would be more powerful if both good and evil were at his disposal. Yet, the God who is *Logos*, not *voluntas* need not create either the world or us in it. But if He does create, He cannot subsequently cause a free being necessarily to participate in His inner life. Such a “determination” denies the free will that was given in the first place. It thus remains “contingent” on the creature’s freedom to decide its beatitude. And if this is so, it is quite likely that the world still will be filled with sorrow as a result of the use of this freedom, as Berry indicated. It is unlikely that the world would exist at all if God refused to accept the possibility of sin and hence sorrow and the possibility of repentance, forgiveness, and mercy as remedies.

All of this really brings us to Plato, to the problem that he had, as a young man, as to whether the world was created in justice or injustice. As the *Republic* teaches, it pretty much looks like it was created in injustice if we judge from the viewpoint of what actually goes on in existing cities. This civic disorder was also something Augustine described very vividly in the *City of God*—a book, by no means accidentally with the same basic

title as Plato's *Republic*. In no way, can we study the history of actual cities in their this-worldly form and not know that injustice often triumphs and justice is punished, as Adeimantus and Glaucon earnestly tell Socrates.

Thus, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was proposed in a political context in Plato. It is a product of precisely political philosophy. It was argued in order to resolve the question of the justice of the world. And this doctrine included not just immortality but judgment. Without judgment of individuals with regard to how they lived, there could be no real justice as it was the individuals who chose the disorders from which sorrows flow. And if there were no justice, there could be no God—except perhaps a voluntarist one.

Andy Catlett, in Berry's story, came to more or less the same conclusion. Plato approached the issue from the unjust not being punished. Berry approached it from the sorrows that are consequent on sin and injustice that are never resolved. This awareness is why "It seemed to him [Catlett] almost proof of immortality that nothing mortal could contain all its sorrows." Obviously, Christ is called "the man of sorrows" precisely in this context.

This conclusion too has Platonic overtones. In the eschatological myth in the *Phaedo*, we have an incident in which someone who has murdered a man is being punished forever in the rivers of Tartarus. The only way that he can escape is if the man he killed forgives him. The Christian gloss on this story is that the murder is not just against the man killed but against all family, friends, and polity. It is also a sin against the light that only the light can forgive. This solution is substantially the reason that Christ is said to have died for all sins and all sinners, whether either the sinner repents or the individual sinned against forgives or not.

II

The moral virtues of which Aristotle speaks in the *Ethics* are good habits, parallel to vices which are their contraries, bad habits. They are expressive of what a man ought or ought not to be in his living—just/unjust, brave/cowardly, temperate/intemperate, and prudent/imprudent. Basically, a virtue/vice relates to every act over which we have some control. Thus we have virtues/vices concerning our given wealth, our anger, our social graces, our wit, and the way we do or do not tell the truth.

Man is not born with virtues or vices, but acquires them through acts of the virtues or vices. Habits, when acquired, enable us to do what we

have chosen to do more easily and smoothly. It should be noted that between virtues and vices lie the habits of continence and incontinence, that is, when we usually but not always do what we ought or ought not to do. Most people in fact are not completely virtuous or vicious, but somewhere in between in the way they control their fears, pleasures, actions, and exchanges with others.

Prudence is the intellectual virtue of the moral virtues. It is the judgment of what is good or bad here and now in the present act that I am considering to put into effect. Prudence thus must be an element in every act. What it refers to is my end, that is, that for which I do all that I do. It ought to refer first of all to what I ought to be. This 'what I ought to be' is the point where metaphysics comes into ethics. Thus, prudence itself is contingent on the end for which I actually live my life. In the light of a chosen end, I decide the particular actions that lead to this chosen end. We might say that the drama of virtue and vice in any given individual life is an anticipation of its fragility or "contingency," as Gilson put it.

Why does such fragility or contingency exist in human life? Basically, to make it worthwhile or significant, even in evil. What does this mean? It means that some things cannot be bad unless we freely choose them. Among these things is the completion of our own meaning or beatitude in which we have some part in its reality, not what it is, but whether we will have it. Thus, it is not enough to speak of the virtues and vices. Aristotle himself talks of the practical virtues and the theoretical virtues. He rightly implies that ultimately the practical virtues, while designed to lead us to beatitude, do not really tell us what it is. We know it is something for its own sake. We know it belongs to a complete life.

The practical virtues practiced in existing cities can lead us to a life in which we have the leisure (to look at things) not constantly overcome by our selection of ends that do not lead us to happiness. That is why we need virtues and to reject vices. The theoretical life itself is or can be a dangerous thing. For it is here wherein we seek to understand just what it is that reality is about, including primarily human reality. Here we seek to know whether it is all right that we be the sort of being we are, subject so obviously to vices and deviations from the good. We live in a contemporary world that has itself willed to affirm that there is no order found objectively in *what is*.

III

Aquinas, following Aristotle, defined man as the being in this universe with both mind and hand. With the mind, he understands what is there. With his hands as tools, he can fashion what he thinks outside of himself into what he wants or needs.

In an old Peanuts sequence, Linus, with Lucy in the background reading a book, is eating a jelly sandwich while looking at his hands: "Hands are fascinating things." He continues: "I like my hands. I think I have nice hands." While Lucy finally looks up from her book, Linus adds: "My hands seem to have a lot of character. These are hands which someday may accomplish great things. These are hands which may someday do marvelous works." Finally, standing in front of an unusually passive Lucy who isn't buying it, he goes on: "They may someday build mighty buildings, or heal the sick, or hit home-runs, or write soul-stirring novels." He then yells at Lucy: "THESE ARE HANDS WHICH MAY SOMEDAY CHANGE THE COURSE OF DESTINY." Lucy calmly looks at these mighty hands and says to Linus: "They've got jelly on them!" In the last scene, Linus is reduced to utter silence, as Lucy walks away.⁵

Of this scene, I might say that it is metaphysics modified by a bad habit. Our loftiest ideals are seen against the kind of messy beings that we in fact are. Habits perfect an already constituted being in what it is. Man is the one mortal being whose perfection does not come with his being, but only with his own input into what it already is.

Gilson argues that Augustinian metaphysics consists in a realism, the realism that is Augustine himself, body and soul. Neither Augustine nor anyone else is simply a natural man. "For St. Augustine . . . the initial *sum* [I am] contains the supernatural order given in his experience and his being, as well as the natural order into which the supernatural is inserted."⁶ To isolate the natural order is to close off man's experience of himself. Augustine, as we know from his *Confessions*, was a young man with not a few faults and sins to deal with. His story is not just of Augustine pursuing the truth, but of God pursuing Augustine. He was a man with several bad habits that he was loathe to give up. He tried to justify them by the theory of the Manicheans, and then of the Platonists, who to Augustine at least seemed to be on the right track. To justify our sinful ways that we do

⁵ Found in Robert Short, *The Gospel according to Peanuts* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967), 46.

⁶ Gilson, 98.

not want to question necessarily involves constructing a mental world deviant from the world *that is*.

Augustine finally realizes that there are things and true judgments about them. He wants to know how this true judgment is possible. He finds truth in God’s search for him, Augustine.

The *primum cognitum* of St. Augustine is not God; it is man within the universe, and, within this universe and this man, the experience of a true judgment. But it must be added that this *primum cognitum* is not even the *primum reale*; on the contrary, it becomes intelligible only on condition of finding its sufficient reason in a transcendent fact which provides its explanation.⁷

The drama that goes on within Augustine’s soul is not a stage-show. It is a real event that is guaranteed by his understanding of God.

The hypothesis of Augustine, then, is that his experience of being ‘hounded by heaven’, to use Francis Thompson’s famous phrase, is empirical to him. He knows it is happening to him and that it is not a delusion or simply a figment of his imagination. “It is grace which turns knowledge into wisdom and moral effort into a virtue, with the result that instead of regarding Christianity as a belated crowning of philosophy, he sees in philosophy an aspect of Christianity itself, since it is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”⁸ The moral effort itself that leads to virtue falls within the more general experience of being led to God by God.

Augustinian moral life is not that of a systematic and orderly acquisition of the natural virtues in the light of the theoretic and supernatural virtues. Rather it is a detailed reflection on the disorders of one’s own soul and the errors of one’s own mind. But in it is still found a thread leading the soul out of the morass of his sins and errors. This reflection means that no one is exempt from this divine searching, neither great sinners nor professional unbelievers, let alone ordinary people. Mostly it is not acknowledged because man does not want it to be acknowledged. Augustine himself struggled mightily with this refusal:

It is in no case possible for man to start from God to deduce from Him the creature; on the contrary, he must mount from the creature to God. The course recommended by St. Augustine—and herein lies

⁷ Id., 97.

⁸ Id., 98.

his personal contribution to the treasure of tradition—is the path to God, leading through this particular creature which is man, and in man, thought, and in thought, truth.⁹

The particular man actually exists, and knows that he does. He knows that he thinks. He knows that the purpose of thinking is truth. This is the way the mind works. He did not cause it to work that way, but he merely notices that it does. Thus, for a finite mind to know the truth, the truth must already exist.

In conclusion, this emphasis on the approach to metaphysics through a single, graced but contingent man, brings us back to Berry's sense of immortality due to the enormous amount of suffering, the cause of which was not resolved or requited in this life. Likewise, it brings us to Gilson's "contingency of our own beatitude." The discussion of truth, as Gilson sees it, "brings us to a sort of moral dialectic that, taking as object of its search the search itself by man of God endeavors to show the presence in the heart of man of a contingency much more tragic and disturbing than that of the universe, because it is the contingency of our own beatitude."¹⁰ The "contingency" of the non-human universe is not conscious, nor does it depend on its own inner life. It cannot properly be called "tragic."

Human beings, on the other hand, can know how and why they are 'capable of truth'. They have minds that know and affirm the truth of things that actually exist. None the less, we still "need to understand the presence in us of an appel by God, who, working in our souls, creates in us a fruitful restlessness, moves, stirs our soul, and leaves it no rest until it has finally put itself into His hands."¹¹ The "contingency of our own beatitude" is such that we can resist this divine pursuit to the end. Augustine thought, in fact, that most people did resist it to the end. This possibility is what I mean by 'habits without metaphysics'. We form our own habits by how we live and choose. Our habits can protect us from ever being aware of things for their own sake. All is seen in the light of what end we have chosen for ourselves. We build a false picture of the world, a system, an ideology, in order to justify what we choose in preference to *what is* and the search of God within our existing immortal souls.

⁹ Id., 102.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Id.

But Augustinian metaphysics begins, not with things out there, but with the restlessness in our own souls. In this restlessness, any person can bypass what Linus called “the course of destiny” to confront the sorrows that he has put into the world, the remedy of which can be considered in immortality. There is indeed a tragedy ‘more profound’ than that of the contingent world. That tragedy is the one that, within the finite world, does not hear the voice stirring in his soul. Augustine heard it and was glad. But there are those who hear it and ‘go away sad’, as the rich young man, because their habits have enabled them to reject a metaphysics open to all that is really found in all actual human souls, among which is the voice of God calling them in whatever condition in which they chose to surround themselves. The world, I suspect, still remains filled with the “restless hearts” of which Augustine spoke. He listened. Not all do.

It seemed to him almost proof of immortality that nothing mortal could contain all its [the world’s] sufferings.

—Wendell Berry¹²

There is present “in the heart of man . . . a contingency much more tragic and disturbing than that of the universe, because it is the contingency of our own beatitude.”

—Étienne Gilson¹³

ON “THE CONTINGENCY OF OUR OWN BEATITUDE.” SOME REFLECTIONS ON GILSON’S “THE FUTURE OF AUGUSTINIAN METAPHYSICS”

SUMMARY

Inspired by selected passages from Wendell Berry’s story “A Place in Time,” the article discusses Étienne Gilson’s essay “The Future of Augustinian Metaphysics” with special regard to the relation of habits to metaphysics. The basis of this relation is human being whose life, from the perspective of Augustinian metaphysics, is permanently unsettled. Man is the one mortal being whose perfection does not come with his being, but only with his own input into what it already is. Habits, then, perfect an already constituted human being in what he or she is. Man is not born, however, with habits, but acquires them through acts of the virtues or vices. The article develops the Augustinian idea according to which the moral effort of man to pursue virtues and escape vices results not so much from his natural desire of ‘beatitude’, but rather from the fact of being led to God by God.

¹² Wendell Berry, “A Place in Time: Some Chapters of a Telling Story,” *The Hunson Review* LXII:2 (Summer 2009): 236.

¹³ Gilson, 102.

KEYWORDS: man, contingency, habit, virtue, vice, metaphysics, beatitude, God, Augustine, Aquinas, Gilson, Berry.