

Metaphysical Poetry as an Expression of Religious Experience and Foundation of Religious Faith

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Abstract: This paper argues that because religious experience is essentially private and because there is an irrepressible need to share it, there is also a need for a suitable medium to articulate the essence of the experiences that ground religious faith. One of those vehicles is poetry, and especially metaphysical poetry, although there are other media of equal importance, including the visual arts and the choral arts, which often mix poetry and music. This paper argues that the role of metaphysical poetry is not to explain the existence of temporal things, but rather to reveal the religious significance of unnoticed or hitherto unappreciated aspects of temporal things. Main arguments and illustrations are indebted metaphysical poetry from the 17th century, to Plato's *Phaedo and Apology*, to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, to the poetry and philosophy of T.S. Eliot, particularly to The Clark Lectures of 1926 and The Turnbull Lectures of 1933, and finally to images published by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration of the United States.

Introduction: That metaphysical poetry can be an expression of religious faith might well seem to be a bold, interesting and, yet, ill-advised thesis. That is because in the seventeenth century poetry was viewed by many as a medium better suited to excite feelings of love and to arouse images of beauty than to set forth arguments that "sparkle" with recondite wit. Wit is one thing; faith another.¹ Thanks largely to T.S. Eliot, the twentieth century took a broader, more charitable view of earlier metaphysical poetry, arguing that the great seventeenth century metaphysical poets managed to weave the emotional and intellectual into one unified work. Indeed, following Eliot, that is the view that I shall take not only of the great seventeenth century metaphysical poets but also of Eliot himself and of much other literature. The primary aim of the paper is to show how metaphysical poetry is related to religious belief, sometimes as an expression of religious belief and other times as a basis for religious belief. Secondary aims are to study the connections of metaphysical poetry to other artistic forms and to metaphysics viewed as a sub-discipline of philosophy.

Metaphysical Poetry and Religious Faith: Most of the world's great religions look *beyond nature* for their inspiration and are therefore metaphysical. If poetry can express experience that is essentially metaphysical, then it can be an expression of religious experience that inspires faith. Religious experience arouses emotions like wonder, awe, consolation dread, hope, and love; all feelings that turn our minds to beauty, goodness or the sublime. The present analysis of religious experience will locate religious emotions principally among the "sublime." Sublimation evokes an image of the physical drifting imperceptibly into metaphysical and possibly to the divine. Yet, Kant had a different take on the sublime. For him the sublime is the fruit of *human reason*, of its great triumphs, especially in mathematics and physics. The feeling of the sublime is a response to the superior, distinctively human capacity to comprehend the apparently unfathomable. Granted: It was natural at the end of the Enlightenment for philosophers like Kant, d'Holbach and Laplace to celebrate the successes of empirical science and therefore to think of our own theories and even of our own minds as sublime. (Kant/Bernard, 1951/orig. 1790, p. 89) Yet there is another way to conceive the progress of science, which invokes Spinozistic metaphysics. Contrary to Kant, when we conceive *nature as a whole* (*viz. sub specie aeternitatis*), we come as close as we possibly can to

¹ Actually, this generalization is risky, as some "metaphysical" poems (or at least some of the poetry written by "metaphysical poets" like George Herbert) were hardly abstract exercises overburdened by subtleties. Some were provocative to an extreme degree, and "ladies" were advised to avoid them altogether. That certain poets who are counted among the metaphysical poets wrote poetry that does not appear to be "metaphysical" shows merely that not all their poetry is metaphysical.

experiencing God.² Not all great *scientific* minds have taken the Kantian view of the sublimity of nature. In particular, Einstein argues that what is remarkable is not that *we* have unraveled the mysteries of nature, but rather that nature is *constituted so that it yields its mysteries to the rational mind*. When we stand in awe of nature we do not stand in awe of *our own reasoning* power but rather in awe of the “passive power” of nature that welcomes human understanding and its methods. To be sure, Einstein inveighs against anthropomorphism, but he also claims that scientific reasoning inspires feeling that is religious “in the highest sense of the word.”

If it is one of the goals of religion to liberate mankind as far as possible from the bondage of egocentric cravings, desires and fears, scientific reasoning can aid religion in yet another sense ... whoever has undergone the intense experience of successful advances made in this domain [of scientific reasoning – my insertion], is moved by a profound reverence for the rationality made manifest in existence. By way of understanding he achieves a far-reaching emancipation from the shackles of personal hopes and desires, and thereby attains that humble attitude of mind towards the grandeur of reason incarnate in experience, and which, at its profoundest depths, is inaccessible to man. This attitude, however, appears to me to be religious in the highest sense of the word. And so it seems to me that science not only purifies the religious impulse of the dross of its anthropomorphism but also contributes to a religious spiritualization of our understanding of life. (Einstein, 1950, p. 29)

Here Einstein has identified the sense in which scientific reasoning and accomplishment arouse feelings that are characteristically religious and are obviously associated with religious faith. But, it is natural to wonder: What is the *mechanism* by which those feelings inspire faith, and can it be that the feelings that inspire faith somehow point to or reveal objective fact?³

² Keep in mind that for Kant God is a part of the “noumenal realm,” which he distinguishes the “phenomenal realm;” in other words, from nature. For Kant God cannot have any form of existence that is defined by reference to nature.

³ It is impossible not to bridle at Einstein’s reference to the “dross” of anthropomorphism. His view of anthropomorphism echoes that of Spinoza, who almost certainly inspired Einstein on this point. Spinoza claims that attributing human qualities to “substance” (that is to God) is not only an error but also an error that is sure to beget more errors. (Spinoza/Curley, 1985/c. 1677, pp. pp. 439 – 56) Yet other philosophers have taken a more charitable view of anthropomorphism, without accepting anthropomorphic descriptions of God as *literally* true. Descartes, for example, argues that even in the quality in which we most closely resemble God, free will, we must acknowledge that “free will” cannot be used “univocally.” The free will of God is completely distinct from our free will because *indifference* in humans is an inevitable consequence of ignorance. God’s will is free, but it is *not clouded by indifference*. As we learn from the following passage, for Descartes, God is *the source* of goodness and truth. “It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so.” (Descartes/Cottingham, 1985/orig. 1642, p. 291). This admonition can be applied to other qualities that are often attributed to God. They are vehicles that help the finite mind conceive, however inadequately, the nature of God. It is worth emphasizing that in the above passage Descartes is essentially endorsing *voluntarism*, attributing *both goodness and eternal truth to the will of God*. In that sense, every truth and every moral value is *contingent* upon God’s will. Surely anthropomorphism that takes a critical view of its necessary limitations is not objectionable for dogmatically insisting upon apparently irreconcilable claims, and surely Einstein would not insist that Descartes’s self-critical, cautious anthropomorphism is “dross.” Indeed, how are finite minds to conceive the Almighty except but likening the inconceivable to what is conceivable? As long as that crucial fact is present to mind, what grounds are there for criticism: Indeed what falsehood is affirmed, and what truth is denied by metaphor that is critical of itself?

Arousing Religious Faith: I shall argue that metaphysical poetry plays an essential role in arousing *feelings* that inspire (and reinforce) religious faith. Let me acknowledge at the outset, however, that metaphysical poetry is by no means the only form of art that has this effect. In fact, metaphysical poetry, or at least *text*, is inextricably connected with other arts that also arouse feeling and inspire faith. Take, for example, the statue of David by Michelangelo that is housed in Florence. The statue is approximately 10 feet tall; David is holding a stone and a sling. When asked why the statue is so tall, considering the fact that David was a boy at the time of his confrontation with the Philistine, Michelangelo is said to have replied that the height of the statue represented additional power that God bestows upon those whom he calls to service. This of course is meant to inspire courage by instilling faith in those who seek righteousness that God will empower them sufficiently.

In some cases visual representations inspire feelings of *dread* and yet *admiration for faithfulness*, a combination that can be awe-inspiring. The story of St. Agatha is an important example. Agatha (231-251 CE), a young Sicilian woman, lived during the reign Decius. At the age of fifteen she was “invited” by Quintian, “a man of consular dignity,” to his bed. As a devout Christian she refused. Out of cruel vengeance, Quintian had her sent to a brothel, where she also refused to surrender her virtue. Quintian removed her from the brothel and demanded the favor of her body, which she again refused. He then ordered that her body be mutilated by severing her breasts. Agatha attributed her survival of the torture to the intervention of St. Peter. After recovering from the mutilation, Quintian again recalled her and repeated his demands. Again, Agatha refused; again she was again condemned by Quintian to torture, this time to be rolled naked over hot coals interspersed with potsherds. The second torture was fatal; she died shortly thereafter, a woman of merely twenty years who had been faithful to her Lord until the very end. (*Catholic Encyclopedia online*, under “A”) (Her image after the first torture is represented in a painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *The Martyrdom of St. Agatha*, c. 1759, which is located in the *Gemäldegalerie* in Berlin. (Bulfinch, 1993/orig. 1759.) Another painting c. 1470 by San di Pietro (1405 – 1481) is an even more gripping depiction of the horrific crime against humanity. (Boehm, 2009, p. 53)⁴

The point that I want to make about these gruesome paintings is that the feelings that they arouse in part depend upon the *stories* that they depict just as the feelings aroused by the famous statue of David depend in part upon the story of David. The dependency of art upon *text* to arouse feeling is even more apparent in the case of music than the visual arts. For example, Bach’s cantatas have emotional impact in part because of the sentiments expressed by their texts. BWV 6, “*Bleib bei uns, denn will Abend werden*” (Stay with us, for then will evening become”), or more liberally, “Stay with us, for evening is near”), was written for Easter Monday. Biblical texts that are associated with the BWV 6 include Luke 24:13 – 35, which recounts the story of the resurrected Jesus’s encounter with travelers on the road to Emmaus. The cantata is written in G minor, and as one might expect, the opening chorus is plaintive, as it appeals to the risen Savior not to absent himself but to remain with his followers. The piece progresses to a celebration of Jesus’s majesty (or more literally, might).⁵ The music itself, without the words, would not arouse the

⁴ These are not the only paintings of note. Others include Sebastiano del Piombo, *The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha*, 1519, and Piero della Francesca, *Saint Agatha bearing her severed breasts on a platter*. Both are included in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. These, like the paintings that are mentioned above, are gruesome.

⁵ For addition discussion, see Spitta/ Bell and Maitland, trans., p. 75f. 1951. *Bleib bei uns* is also musically significant in that its melodic line also appears in the *Passion According to St. Matthew*. For further discussion of text and metaphor as it relates to Bach, also see: Zbikowski’s “Metaphor and Music,” for an analysis of Bach’s *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*, BWV, 61. (Gibbs, 2008, pp. 502 – 24). The pertinent biblical texts in BWV 61 are located within Rev 3, which raises the image of Jesus knocking on the door of the heart. (The term “Heiden” in this context is used to refer to someone who plays an apostolic role to both Jews and Gentiles, an obvious reference to Jesus. The title might be rendered as “Now Comes the Holy Apostle.”)

feelings that reinforce the faith of the believers for whom it was written. The point is that the power of non-verbal representations to arouse feeling and inspire faith is greatly augmented by the texts and stories that accompany the art.⁶ Indeed, that is also true of faith that is inspired by the texts associated with the celebration of “scientific reasoning.” Not everyone (in fact hardly anyone) is equipped to comprehend the beauty of the theories and equations that are the fruit of Einstein’s mind. Yet there are images that arouse the feelings and inspire faith in the scientific reasoning that Einstein cherishes. A favorite of mine, *Saturn the Mighty*, is an image of Earth and its moon in the background with ring E of Saturn in the foreground. (Cassin-Huygens, NASA, 2013, plate 229). This photographic image, taken by Cassini, would not have inspired the humility and reverence that Einstein attributes to scientific reasoning except for the fact that it was taken by a camera of our making in orbit around Saturn. The image reminds us not so much of the grandeur of the human mind but rather of the “work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars.” (KJV Ps. 8:3) The photograph itself is a representation of our relation to the cosmos, and the fact that it was taken from a machine of our making that was deployed as a result of human reason and will is proof that we exist in a universe that at least in some measure yields to our understanding. Without the *story* behind it, the image might be viewed as a bit of scientific fiction. Perhaps the image has but little effect on the *popular* mind because a culture that regularly and deliberately conflates *fantasy with reality* cannot fully appreciate “Saturn the Mighty.”

Natural Science and Metaphysical Poetry: I claim that metaphysical poetry is the poetry of awe, wonder and dread; that it is a blend of reason and emotion. It began in the West with metaphysical poems that were sung. We have already encountered an example in Ps. 8,

³When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars,
which thou has ordained, ⁴What is man, that thou are mindful of him? And of the
son of man, that thou visiteth him? (KJV Ps 8:3-4)

These two verses from an ancient text take a far more cautious view of human merit than Kant (or Einstein). Perhaps unsurprisingly, even the *greatest* of the early moderns, who were devoted to their religion, were also cautious in their estimation of human intellectual merit. For example, Boyle writes:

And if God be allowed to be, as indeed he is, the Author of universe, how will it appear that he, whose knowledge infinitely transcends ours, and who may be supposed to operate according to the dictates of his own immense wisdom, should in his creating of things have respect to the measure and ease of human understandings, and not rather, if of any, of angelic intellects. (Boyle/Stewart, 1991/1663, p. 171.)

Other great scientific minds of the early modern period were not to be outdone in celebrating the “the Author of the universe.” Indeed sometimes *metaphysical poetry* is *disguised* as *natural philosophy*, that is, *physics (and conversely, by the way)*. Consider the following *prose*, which I represent below in verse as metaphysical poetry. The part to be rearranged in verse is introduced as follows: “From his true dominion it follows that the true god is a living, intelligent, and powerful Being, and from his other perfections, that he is supreme and more perfect.” The “prose” that immediately follows describes God and his creation:

He is eternal and infinite,
Omniscient and omnipotent; ...
He endures from infinity to infinity;
He governs all things and

⁶ We shall reflect further upon *Blieb bei uns* in: “§What Are the Objects of Similes and Metaphors?”

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Knows all things that
Are or can be done.
He is not eternity and infinity, but
Eternal and infinite;
He is not duration and space, but
Endures and is present. ...

Since every particle of space is always, and
Every indivisible moment of duration is everywhere,
Certainly the Maker and Lord of all things
Cannot be never and nowhere.

These lines are meant to be read rapidly and emphatically, as if to the beat of drum. Especially in the longer passage we find metaphysical assertions as well as arguments that are arranged as a poetic catechism that marches relentlessly. In the last “stanza” the rhythm of the first two lines is unavoidably compromised by the complexity of its logic, as if to emphasize its importance, but the final two lines conclude the argument with finality, without qualification or apology. It is impossible to read these lines and not to be overwhelmed by force of their logic and by faith that they express. The original text is in Latin, which was translated into English by A. Motte; the author is Newton himself; the passage occurs in the General Scholium to the second edition of the *Principia*, viz., *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, which was published in 1713.⁷ (Ariew and Watkins, 2009, p. 289)

It is important to remember that both Boyle and Newton knew all the arguments against theism that were advanced by the early atomists: Democritus, Leucippus and later by Epicurus; all the arguments that purport to show that nature is purely deterministic (or else partly probabilistic). It is impossible for me to believe that Boyle and Newton would not write the very same words *now* that they wrote long ago. *Nothing really has changed*; there are three possibilities: that nature is mindlessly determined; or that nature is all or in part chance; or that nature is intelligently ordered, although not so that all the details of its ordering will ever be known by human beings. Each alternative is like a coin that purports to be backed by a “measure” of truth; but two of those coins *must* be counterfeit. Incidentally, “intelligently ordered” means ordered in a way that it is completely comprehensible to a rational mind who has determined *all its pertinent facts*. That is not the same as the assertion that God exists, but it is difficult to imagine what or who else could be responsible for the *intelligibility* of infinite mindless matter. It seems to be odd, if not inconsistent, to have faith that ultimately every fact about infinitely mindless matter can be explained by empirical science⁸ *except the very fact* that every fact about infinitely mindless matter can be explained by empirical science.⁹

⁷ Some argue that philosophers like Newton (and of course Descartes) were dissembling in expressions of their faith, which, it seems to me, reveals a very deep misunderstanding of them both, especially of Newton. By 1713 Newton was virtually idolized throughout England and the continent as the author of the Enlightenment. Newton had neither a possible motive of advancement nor purpose of evasion in confessing his faith in the very work that forever undermined the Aristotelian view of nature and thereby advanced Newton’s own conception of God’s creation. I think that that Newton must have meant every word that he wrote.

⁸ Einstein himself claims that claims that the aspiration of science for truth and understanding also stems from the “sphere of religion.” In addition to the aspiration of science for truth and understanding “*there also belongs the faith in the possibility of that the regulations valid for the world of existence are rational, that is, comprehensible to reason. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist without that profound faith.*” (Einstein, 1973/1953, p. 26)

⁹ The idea that the success of science cannot explain itself by its own principles is extremely complicated from a purely formal, logical point of view. Suppose that a theory could account for every prediction that is made on a purely physicalist basis. This presumably would mean that every prediction could be explained “neurologically.” Now suppose that we have a neurological theory that can accomplish this enormously complicated task, in which are to “explain” not only all true predictions but also the power to predict by *representational* structures (like natural language and mathematics). Suppose that the total theory at a given time is N. Notice that the act of predicting

Metaphysical Poetry as Ultimate Abstraction: According to Eliot, metaphysical poetry can engage both feeling and thought; as we have seen in *Psalm 8* and in Newton's *Principia*. The thought and feeling that they arouse together can ground religious faith. Consider the following passage from Eliot's *East Coker (of the Four Quartets)*

You say I am repeating
Something I have said before, I shall say it again.
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
 You must go by a way wherein there is not ecstasy,¹⁰
In order to arrive at what you do not know
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
 You must go by the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.
(Eliot, 1988/orig. 1940, p. 187)

Here Eliot's teaching is partly Socratic, for what we know is (only) what we do not know; however far our knowledge extends, it is ever tentative, open to revision and hence not real knowledge at all. Especially in 2016, older arguments that science "approximates" the ultimate truth to which it inexorably presses seem to be paradoxical and wishful. Although many now hope for a new synthesis that will reconcile and even unite the macro and the micro into one comprehensive theory, perhaps like the grand Newtonian synthesis that accounted for terrestrial and celestial motion, contemporary natural science raises many new questions for each question that it answers.

Those ensconced in liberal versions of the religions of Abraham will welcome Eliot's teaching that what we own is not what we like to think that we own, and therefore that we own nothing of this world. It follows by some sort of certain logic that where we are is not in this world, where everything that we "own" can be taken away, but rather in the eternal, where nothing is possessed to be taken away. Metaphysical poetry is much deeper than the rigorous orthodoxy of traditional philosophical ontology. It is deeper because it is maximally abstract. Its fluidity allows the mind to engage it and come to rest on the objects of its metaphors, whatever those objects may be. Yet this raises a new paradox. In the illustrations of Michelangelo's David, of St. Agatha, of Ps 8 3-4, of *Bleib bei uns*, of the passage from Newton's *Principia*, and even in the verse from *East Coker*: in all these illustrations we are reminded of biblical texts or directed to texts that inform contemplation. In other words, these metaphysical illustrations and texts have *already* been interpreted for us; their meanings are *given*. The obvious question is: How was it possible for these texts to have been meaning in the first place; how was it possible for us to come to *understand them*?

"everything" by N is an event *itself*, which cannot be represented by N. (If you try to imagine N representing itself, you would not be imagining N but rather an enlarged theory N* that includes N.) So, the idea that every prediction can be captured by a theory like N appears to be incoherent. There are other arguments that are equally threatening that seem to undermine the capacity of reason to explain itself, in other words to offer a complete picture of physical reality. Even so, I do not make much of those arguments, because there are at once necessarily and impossibly vague; yet, there is one thing surely to be learned from them, which is that the arguments for the contrary, for the accessibility in theory of all the secrets of nature to the human mind, are also necessarily and impossibly vague.

¹⁰ Possibly the reference to "ecstasy" is meant to refer to Donne's eponymous poem.

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In 1929 Ludwig Wittgenstein delivered his famous “A Lecture of Ethics” at the University of Cambridge. In that lecture he argued that both religion and ethics are essentially meaningless. How to interpret his argument is controversial, but I think that it is at least clear in its broad outline. According to Wittgenstein, it is possible to learn the meaning of a word only if we can ultimately associate it with a *shared* experience. So, we learn the meaning of a word like “dog” because we are able to direct our attention to the same thing and apply the same word to it. If we could not ground our language in common experience, then we could not use its words and phrases to refer to objects of our common experience. The problem with ethics and religion, according to Wittgenstein, is that there aren’t shared experiences that ground the use of ethical and religious terms. These terms are therefore essentially meaningless. Their only real content is emotive, but they cannot be intelligibly used to state “facts.” (Wittgenstein/Cahn and Haber, 1995/1929, pp. 81-6).

Wittgenstein’s thesis may at first seem to be incredible, especially in light of the foregoing examples. We can all read the same biblical texts; we can visit the same statue of David in Florence, we can watch the same paintings of Agatha. All that, however, misses Wittgenstein’s point. We cannot *see* the *evil* in Quintian or the *good* in Agatha; we cannot *see* “*thy* fingers” of Ps. 8 and Newton’s *Principia*; we cannot *visualize* or even *imagine* the eternal, where *events* surely are impossible if only because change is constrained by the temporal. It cannot be that words, like “good” and “eternal” much less phrases like “the work of thy fingers” have meanings that we all know and share. According to the Wittgenstein of 1929, these words and phrases are metaphors or similes that have emotional impact, but *nothing* more.

As a matter of fact, something like Wittgenstein’s argument was anticipated by I.A. Richards in 1924 in his *Principles of Literary Criticism*.

Beauty as an external ... quality of things ... as well as Good, are [both] unanalyzable Idea[s]. Both are special twists given to some of our impulses by habits deriving ultimately from desires. They linger in our minds because to think of a thing as Good or Beautiful gives more immediate emotional satisfaction than to refer to it as satisfying out impulses in one special fashion or another. (Richards, 1924, p. 264 as quoted in Eliot/Schuchard, 1993/1926)

Richards’ argument ties ethereal qualities like “Good,” “Beautiful” and especially “Love” to desire. The meaning of the terms purport to refer to externalities but actually refer to internalities of our psyches. This, I believe, is just the sort of argument that inspired Wittgenstein. Yet, Richard’s and Wittgenstein’s arguments were *anticipated* and *countered* by Eliot himself in his doctoral dissertation *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*, which was completed in 1916. Here is the gist of Eliot’s argument:

...although we certainly cannot know immediate experience directly as an object. We can yet arrive at it by inference, and even conclude that it is the starting point of our knowing, since it is only in immediate experience that knowledge and its object are one (Eliot/Schuchard, 1993/1916, p. 55 fn. 19 as quoted by Schuchard, p. 55 fn 26)

What are we to make of this strange doctrine? If we know that *the* (to wit, some particular) dog is on the mat, must not our experience have been of a single, *unified* thing, something like *the fact* of the dog being on the mat; and must not that *thing* be yet another, distinct object of our experience? Although we have a visual experience of the dog, and of the mat, and of the spatial relation between the dog and the mat, some have argued that *the fact* of the dog being on the mat cannot be a mere posit, an hypostatization based upon and derived from those other more fundamental experiences. It is argued that the truth about the dog and the mat is a *unified whole*, and asks, as though the answer were obvious: Doesn’t that whole *correspond*

to the thing that we know when we know that the dog is on the mat? Yet this, which many have affirmed, is exactly what Eliot and F.H. Bradley, deny. They think that our experience of the dog being on the mat is a mere posit, an hypostatization. If we ask just where does that posit lie with respect to the experience of the dog, the mat and the relation of one to the other, we might indeed say that they there are *experienced* together, *as a unity*; but we surely must say further of that unified experience that it is *identical to the content* of our judgement that the dog is on the mat. So, the *experience of knowing* and the object of knowing, the thing known, are one.

Many idealists have gone much farther; they claim that not only is the fact of the dog being on the mat a mere experience but also the dog, the mat and the spatial relation of the one to another are also mere posits. This is late nineteenth century idealism in its most radical form,¹¹ but this full-fledged idealism is very counter-intuitive and difficult to believe. Its attenuated form, advocated by Eliot, is much more plausible; it insists only that *the dog being on the mat*, the *content* of the thing that is known, is properly identified with the *experience* of the dog being on the mat. In this attenuated form, the dog, the mat and the spatial relation of the dog to the mat are still “objective,” which is to say, mind-independent entities or relations. This means that *the dog’s being on the mat* is *not an ontologically independent fact*; it is simply identified with the experience of the dog’s being on the mat.

It is worth asking what led philosophers like Wittgenstein, Richards and even Russell to think that we should account for the truth of a statement like the dog is on the mat by insisting that there is a mind-independent fact of the dog being on the mat that validates our thought that the dog is on the mat. Perhaps the answer lies in the relation between language and ontology. Their arranged marriage (by some kind of obsessive philosophy) was troubled from the beginning by the need of each to dominate the other. Language insists that whatever can be named must find a place in mind-independent objective “reality.” Ontology in its turn insists that whatever is real must be rewarded with a name, an objective referential agent. Thus, tachyons, photons, positrons and electrons find themselves named and counted among the “*objects*” of the world. On the other hand, *references to experiences* (for example, of the dog being on the mat) find themselves rewarded by ontological promotions from mere agents of reference to actual objects. Viewing the matter in this way, some say that the experience of the dog being on the mat refers somehow to the fact of the dog’s being on the mat, which is yet another object in addition to the dog, the mat and their spatial relation to each other.¹²

According to Eliot, Wittgenstein’s, Richard’s and Russell’s mistake can be traced all the way back to Descartes. It was Descartes, Eliot claims, who is *committed* to the view that the objects of our *thought* are not really things “outside” us, like the dog, the cat and the spatial relation of the two. On the contrary, what we really know when we know that the dog is on the mat is one of our own ideas, which is of the dog being on the mat. It was this mistaken theory that ultimately led to the futile effort of construing the contents of the inner life as a set of objects to be studied, just as though they were physical objects. Descartes’ fatal error, Eliot claims, was driven by the thought that the relation of the object of an idea (or of an experience) is intuitively likened to the relation between a piece of wax and the seal that imprints it. Instead of thinking about the world, we think only about what is in our own “heads,” which is to say “minds.” In fact the error is even worse than it might at first appear. That is because as we *reflect* upon our *experience* of the dog

¹¹ Sometimes this radical form of idealism is attributed, I believe falsely, to Hegel. Hegel’s idealism does not include what Kant referred to as the “phenomenal realm,” the “realm” of reality that is studied in natural science. Hegel was satisfied by Kant’s account of physics and ordinary perception. But Hegel thought that what Kant refers to as the “noumenal realm,” which “includes” what is good and God, is merely cultural artifact, and hence that the investigation of the noumenal realm and its contents is essentially an investigation of human experience.

¹² These issues are explored by Russell in “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism.” (Russell/Marsh, 1964/1918, pp. 175-83)

being on the mat, we inevitably create yet another *experience*: our experience *of our experience* of the dog being on the mat. Self-replicating references to the contemplation of one's own experiences deflects us from any possibility of thinking of things outside ourselves, even of dogs and mats that their spatial relations. Whenever we try to think of them, we actually think of our own ideas. If we cannot think of *them*, then surely it is just as Wittgenstein and Richards suppose, which is that we cannot think of any "metaphysical" reality except that which is concocted by our own imaginations. Eliot concludes that "Descartes's extraordinary crude and stupid piece of reasoning is the sort of thing which gave rise to the whole pseudo-science of epistemology which has haunted the nightmares of the last three hundred years." (Schuchard/Eliot, 1993/1916, p. 81)

Of course, *Eliot recognizes that Descartes did not believe or explicitly say* that his account of the nature of ideas would block the connection of thought and material reality so that it would be impossible to think of dogs, their mats and the spatial relations between dogs and their mats; on the contrary, Eliot's claim is that that Descartes' theory of ideas *commits* him to an impossible idealism. Eliot's remonstrance, which borders on abuse, is uncharacteristically uncharitable. That Eliot pilloried Descartes shows just how great a mistake Eliot thought Descartes had made. In any case, we need to ask whether or not Eliot's criticism is actually justified. The answer, I believe, is that although Eliot's criticism follows much Cartesian scholarship of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there is reason to think that those earlier ways of construing Descartes' teaching are incorrect, and hence that Eliot's reading and analysis of the consequences of Descartes theory are also incorrect. (Nadler, 1989, pp. 1 – 44; especially p. 9) When we reflect upon our idea of the dog being on the mat, it is not as though we think of two things, the dog being on the mat and our idea of the dog being on the mat. It is true that Descartes distinguishes two aspect of ideas: "formal" reality (the mere fact that they are thought or that they can be brought to mind) and "objective" reality. By objective reality Descartes means whatever gives an idea its *identity*, that is, what differentiates that idea from others; for example what differentiates the idea of the dog being on the mat from the idea of the cat being on the mat. Now, for Descartes, the content of an idea, the objective feature of its "reality," is identical with the idea itself. To "have" an idea is just to have the content of the idea before one's mind. There is *just* the content and its presence to mind; *nothing more*. Ironically, on this reading, Descartes and Eliot are of one mind.

This explains much of interest in Descartes philosophy. For example, the content of my idea of the dog being on the mat is contingent; that is to say, it might or might not be (or have been) true. Yet Descartes claims that our idea of God is an idea of something that *necessarily exists*, that is, a thing that is *eternal and perfect*. What could possibly account for the fact that we have that idea? Descartes proclaims: Only something that is eternal and perfect! And what could that thing be? Of course the one and only eternal perfect thing: God! Therefore God must exist. Now, defending this argument was tough sledding for Descartes. Descartes' argument relies upon his own reasoning, but how do we know that we can trust our own reasoning? By more reasoning? Might not some powerful, malignant force deceive us into thinking that our reasoning is correct when it isn't? Moreover Descartes claims that all the ideas in his argument are clear and distinct, and besides, the connections of those ideas to each other are clear and distinct. The whole argument is like an elegant, flawless piece of geometrical reasoning. Even so, suppose that Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives the idea of his entire argument for the existence of God as a unified whole. It is at that point that Descartes makes the crucial move. He claims that because his idea is *clear and distinct*, it *accurately represents*. Since we clearly and distinctly perceive the soundness of the argument for existence of God, God must exist. In other words, the content of our idea of God must accurately represent. Yet all this depends upon the crucial assumption that every clear and distinct idea accurately represents. But how do we know that? Descartes says that *we know that we are not deceived in our reasoning because God exists and protects us from deception!* This is the nerve of Descartes' famous argument for the existence of God in *Meditations III*; it was greeted by a furious chorus of contempt. It is circular, the furies proclaimed: We have assumed the existence of God to validate the principle that every clear and distinct idea is true, that is accurately represents, but that is precisely the principle that we have

relied upon to prove the existence of God! At the very least, this surely shows that we mustn't assume that Descartes's argument proves anything at all.¹³

Let's step back, and focus on the idea that the *content* of our experience of God's eternity, perfection and necessary existence is the same as the *object* of that experience. Wouldn't that show that God exists? Well, perhaps it would if we could be *certain* that *we really do have a clear and distinct idea or genuine experience* of God's eternity, perfection and necessary existence. Sometimes Descartes seems to take just this point of view, but his critics have demurred. We often just *think that we have ideas of things when we really do not*, and that explains why it is that some of our beliefs are just false even supposing that the content of our "knowledge" is the same as the thing "known." Yet, Descartes remonstrates: No worries in the case of God (or mathematics) because we do *clearly and distinctly perceive* those ideas. So, we are directly acquainted with (or have clear and distinct ideas of) objects that must exist. But just where did we get those ideas? Descartes proclaims triumphantly: They are innate!

Descartes critics, however, are not silenced. They complain that actually our "idea of God" is not the idea of a perfect, eternal necessary being: Descartes just *thinks* that he has an idea of the perfect, eternal necessary God and that his idea of God is clear and distinct; in fact, they conclude, Descartes really didn't know what he was thinking about. Gassendi argued that the idea of a perfect thing can be derived from the idea of an imperfect thing by "removing its imperfections." (Gassendi/Cottingham, *et. al.*, 1984/1681, §206 – 4; pp. 145-49, especially p. 149) In other words, our idea of God is really an idea of a temporal thing; perhaps of ourselves or of our parents or of a great hero, with its "imperfections" removed. A century later Hume argued that we do not have an actual idea of God as a necessary being if only because all real existence is *contingent*; in other words, because *nothing necessarily exists*. (Hume/Smith, 1947/1779, p. 189) Besides Hume claimed, it is easy to explain how we arrive at our false idea of God: the idea of God is simply the idea of our own goodness and wisdom, augmented without limit. (Hume/Beauchamp, 2000/1748, 2:6, p. 14)

Descartes' response to Gassendi (and presumably what would have been his response to Hume) is that our idea of imperfection depends upon our idea of perfection (rather than the converse, which Gassendi asserted). We cannot conceive imperfections unless we have first conceived perfection, because an imperfection is something that falls short of perfection; in other words our idea of imperfection depends conceptually upon our idea of perfection. Therefore, since the idea of God is the idea of a perfect thing, it cannot have been derived from the idea of an imperfect thing. It therefore seems that everything comes down to whether or not we actually have an idea of God, who is eternal, perfect and necessary. Ultimately, the only questions for Cartesians appear to be (a) whether or not we really have an idea of God who necessarily exists (if he exists at all); (b) whether or not that idea of God is clear and distinct; and (c) whether or not every clear and distinct idea accurately represents. Assuming that we set aside the hyperbolic, systematic doubt that is raised by the Evil Demon Hypothesis, we may dispose of (c). And this is hardly unreasonable; after all, in mathematics what more could be asked of a proof than that it be clear and distinct? What indeed could count against the truth of a clear and distinct idea? So the crucial questions are (a) and (b), which boil down to the single question: Do we have a clear and distinct idea of God?

Consider the idea of a triangle. A triangle is a plane, closed, three-sided rectilinear figure. That seems to be about as clear and distinct as an idea can be. Granted: we need ultimately need to deal with the concept of a geometric point and of the lines and planes "generated" by geometric points. Admittedly the concept

¹³ But we mustn't be too quick to dismiss it either. Descartes' argument enjoys formidable contemporary support. For example, Joseph Almog writes: "... let me say here outright, in view of many derisive modern comments on his [Descartes'] proof [of the existence of God in *Meditations* III], that Descartes' launches here a real proof, as good a proof as any ("mathematical") proof I know, and one revelatory of the most fundamental features of both (i) nature's nature and (ii) our mind's nature. (Almog, 2008, p. 50f.) The immediately preceding quotation is the conclusion of a long brilliant, interpretive argument beginning at *Ibid*, p. 47.

of a geometric object with zero height, width and depth seems to be a conception of nothing, which perhaps is not so very different from no conception of anything. Even so, the idea of a triangle has seemed by many thinkers to be clearer and more distinct than the idea of God. Who can deny that the idea of eternal, necessarily existent perfection *seems to be* both exuberant and evanescent? On the other hand, Descartes was a great mathematician himself; he knew what ideas of mathematics are clear and distinct, and he thought that by *that* standard that he had a clear and distinct idea of God. So, someone might just say that when it comes to clear and distinct ideas “If it is good enough for Descartes, it’s good enough for me.” I think that Pascal, who was also a great mathematician, might well have said that about Descartes, except for one worry, which proved to be decisive as far as Pascal was concerned.

Pascal, claimed that having an idea of God is not like having an idea of a mathematical entity or knowing a mathematical truth; like having the idea of a triangle or knowing the Pythagorean Theorem. For Pascal and like-minded believers, even if we grant Descartes’ argument in *Meditations III*, his understanding of God is too far removed from ordinary experience; it is too abstract; too much like mathematics. True: We might convince ourselves that triangles are perfect (lacking nothing essential to three-sided, closed, rectilinear plane figure), eternal and necessarily existent, whether or not there are any triangles exemplified “in nature.” But the analogous reasoning about God yields only assurance of an impersonal God, a God that is a mere abstraction. Believers like Pascal conclude that *immediate religious experience* must enter into any account of the idea of God.¹⁴ Otherwise we cannot know *who* God really is; we are not *acquainted* with God. This appears to entail some form of intuitionism or even mysticism. If the object of veridical experience and its content are the same; then to have an idea of God is to know God, to be acquainted with God in some way, somehow. The mysticism of Pascal (and of others like St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross) differs from the theological realism of Descartes in their understanding of *how* we come to have the idea of God; in particular in the nature the *experience* of coming to “know” God. That difference is crucial. Cartesian realism seeks precision; it seeks to demonstrate with certainty, with the intent of pressing an ineluctable conclusion – just as an opponent in chess might force a checkmate. What Pascal and other mystics seek is an experience that reveals God; not an argument that forces us to concede that God exists.

This brings us back to Gassendi and Hume. They deny that the idea of God is coherent, whether it derives from demonstration, intuition or mystical union. Moreover, as we have seen, I.A. Richards is skeptical not only about God but also about “Beauty” and “Good.” What do *we* have to say to *them*? For those who cannot bring themselves to accept the careful philosophical arguments of Descartes,¹⁵ all that is left is intuitionism or mysticism, experiences that inspires religious faith, which brings us back to metaphysical poetry and its associated arts. Gassendi, Hume, Richards, Wittgenstein and Russell all would object that that metaphysical poetry has nothing to offer except similes and metaphors. They justifiably insist that if those similes and metaphors are true, they must be similes and metaphors for *something*; but just what is that something?

What Are the Objects of Similes and Metaphors?

Metaphysical poetry, as Eliot (and I) understand it, is always philosophical; yet it is never philosophy. It does not attempt to discover or to prove, but rather to inspire. Metaphysical poetry and its associated arts

¹⁴ In *Pensées* Pascal emphasizes the importance of religious experience; in fact, the way to faith, Pascal instructs, is through ritual, through masses and worship. (PascalLevi, 1995/1670, p. 155)

¹⁵ Of course many other philosophers have offered arguments for the existence of God. Consideration of them would obviously be a project that is too long for any single paper. In any case, I think, like Almog -- fn.13, that Descartes’ argument of *Meditations III* is a tremendous achievement; in fact, the best “proof” of the existence of God ever offered. In my view *Meditations III* is rational theology’s highest trump card.

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arouse feeling, which in turn inspires faith that presupposes belief. Religious experience is aroused in and by the stuff of daily life. As Eliot expresses it in the third of the Turnbull lectures:

Now, there is a great deal of good poetry in the world that is not metaphysical. Indeed, some of the greatest. You only have metaphysical poetry, as I understand it, when you have a philosophy exerting its influence, not directly through belief, but indirectly through feeling and behavior, upon the minute particulars of a poet's daily life, his quotidian mind, perhaps his way of love-making, but also any activity. (Eliot/Schuchard, 1963/1933, p. 232)

Belief in God, therefore, is not to be pushed in metaphysical poetry as demonstration, as it undeniably is in Descartes's monumental argument of *Meditations III*; rather belief in God is generated by feeling, in general by feeling that is aroused through the "minute particulars of the poet's daily life." Here there cannot be any pretense of objectivity; the exertion of influence through feeling and behavior is personal and intimate. It is not strictly prayer, though I suppose it could be if the prayer were influenced by philosophy; it is rather a feeling that accompanies a *new perspective* on the familiar, upon daily life. That new perspective, I shall argue, involves new or renewed belief, sometimes religious belief.

According to Eliot, belief differs from "age to age," so that when a person "asserts 'I believe X' we must take into account the time and position of the author of the statement. This accounting is not so much a matter of the relativity of the object of belief, of the X in the "belief in X," but *rather of the believing itself*. (Eliot/Schuchard, 1963/1933, p. 186) Because we may use the same words, even "*Credo*," from age to age and mean different things by them, the actual contents of the beliefs we have may only appear to be the same because they are expressed by the same words. Moreover an apparent shift in our attitude toward content may be misleading if the content that inspires the attitude is not the same as the content previously designated by the same word. And even if the content and the word are the same, still the "believings" of them might differ because the meaning of "*Credo*" itself might have changed.¹⁶

For Eliot, Dante is the metaphysical poet *par excellence*. Eliot's prime example is drawn from *Paradiso*, where Dante attempts to express the feeling of entering heaven, but Dante thinks that the feeling presupposes belief, as is evident from the language he chooses:

Meseemed a cloud enveloped us, shining, dense, firm and polished, like a diamond smitten by the sun. Within itself the eternal pearl received us, as water doth receive a ray of light, though still itself unleft.¹⁷

¹⁶ This raises a crucial question, which is beyond the scope of this paper, but surely demands paper of its own. If we mean different things by words like "beauty," "love" "cruelty," "God," "eternality" and even by "*Credo*," does that mean that metaphysics is essentially subjective, that there cannot be objective *metaphysical* facts? That is surely what Wittgenstein would have said, and I think that is the prevailing opinion among contemporary Anglophone analytic philosophers. To put a finer point on it, shall we say that there isn't an objective, mind-independent metaphysical reality just *because* we cannot be certain about the meanings of the words we have used to describe that reality? Surely this inference must offend those who insist upon proportioning belief to evidence. After all, why should *our* failure to find an objective, precise way of describing prove that there is nothing to describe? Doesn't this inference embody the very idealism that so many have been determined to resist? Why is it that "subjectivity" must describe the nature of what we are trying to know rather than the limitations of those who seek to know? There isn't subjectivity in "objects;" only in the *subjects* who seek objective belief about objects; the existence and properties of objects are necessarily "objective."

¹⁷ The translation is deliberately represented by Eliot as prose. It is reproduced by Eliot from the *Paradiso of Dante*. Temple Classics edition, London: J.M. Dent. The original follows:

*Parave a me che nube ne coprisse
lucida, spessa, solida e polita,*

As Eliot observes, the “adjectives” are those that might be chosen from a scientific text, and the metaphors have a “rational necessity.” (Eliot/Schuchard, 1993/1926, p. 121) They arouse a feeling that indirectly calls up a belief, a belief in the beatific vision or something like it. And just what does ‘belief’ connote in this context? Nothing that can be demonstrated; rather something that impresses itself on the mind *via* metaphor and simile; and what here is meant by belief? That would depend upon the mind and upon the time; perhaps the *Geist* of a time or of a mind that would be quite foreign to us.

Eliot contrasts Dante and Donne. From Eliot’s perspective Donne really is not a metaphysical poet, although to this relatively untutored mind Donne is excluded for relatively “technical” reasons. Yet, Eliot thinks that those “technical” reasons go to the very heart of metaphysical poetry. Eliot claims that in Donne’s poetry “the idea has been developed to suit the image, and the image and not the idea is the important thing.” (Eliot/Schuchard, 1993/1926, p. 133) Below is an example of a dreadful image raised by Donne, which we shall contrast with the images in the paintings of Agatha’s passion.

Or sometimes in a beheaded man,
Though at those two Red Seas, which freely ran,
One from the trunk. Another from the head,
His soul be sail’d to her eternal bed,
His eyes will twinkle, and his tongue will roll,
As though he beckoned and call’d back his soul,
He grasps his hands, and he pulls his feet,
And seems to reach, and to step forth to meet
His soul; when all these motions which we saw,
Are but as ice, which crackles at a thaw,
Or as a lute, which in moist weather rings
Her knell alone, by cracking of her strings.¹⁸

In this passage it is easy to see what Eliot means by “suited the image.” The idea, *whatever the idea*, that is hidden in this horrific image is not merely subjective, but has been taken as a prisoner by the image. By that I mean that the mind is paralyzed and unable to move beyond the image even to speculate about philosophical morals. There is one possible exception, which goes unnoticed by Eliot; it is the reference to the lute and its cracking strings that begin in the penultimate line. It is evocative of the lines in the *Phaedo* where Simmias wonders whether or not the body and soul might be likened to the lyre and the harmonies it creates, and whether or not the harmonies might cease if the lyre be broken. (Plato/Jowett, 84a-84e, 1953, pp. 439f.)

Here we see the “perspectives” that are generated by text and by supporting visual imagery. The paintings of Agatha, gripping as they are, could not prompt the same ideas without the story of Agatha. Agatha’s story refers to the quotidian; that is, to Quintian’s carnal desire, to Agatha’s refusals, to her torture and death. Donne’s beheaded man reawakens terrible images of the religious wars of the seventeenth century (and of the French Revolution) and, indeed, of the terror of our own time. Stories and images from the modern and contemporary eras excite the same emotions and reinforce the same beliefs as the ancient story of Quintian and Agatha. Those experiences excite feelings of outrage as well as fear, disgust and despair;

quasi adamanteche lo sol ferisse
Per entro se l’eterna margarita
ne recepette, com’acqua recepe
raggio di luce, permanendo unita.

¹⁸ Eliot/Schuchard 1993/1926, p. 133f. The passage is from Donne, *The Second Anniversaries* (“Of the Progress of the Soule”) lines 9 – 20, which is reproduced from (Grierson, 1912).

and those feelings lead indirectly to belief, especially about the cruelty and evil of Quintian and the faithfulness and goodness of Agatha; about the absurdity of hating and killing for what is mere faith, and about the vanity in thinking that power can be validated by cruelty. These are philosophical ideas prompted by the quotidian, and in this way visual art, stories and poetry work upon the mind and the heart to validate *veridical perspectives, correct ways of looking at things*; which is to say, *true beliefs* about good and evil; about absurdity and faith; about vanity, hatred and cruelty.

It is time to return to BVW 6. Consider the text of its second chorus, which I translate liberally as prose:

In this final, troubled time, grant us, Lord, resolve, that we may keep your Word
and sacrament pure until our end.¹⁹

Broadly, this chorus invokes the image of “troubled time” and prays for the determination to remain faithful until our and perhaps *the* end. Shall we say that this text is itself a piece of metaphysical poetry? Does it raise a quotidian image that leads somehow to feeling that indirectly secures belief?²⁰ Answering introduces yet another complication. Sometimes *text* becomes part of *shared quotidian experience*. The communal recitation of text invigorates familiar feelings, which in turn secure beliefs. Those beliefs are not like the beliefs of science, or mathematics or even everyday veridical perception. The beliefs that are secured by faith are presupposed by faith; by faith that is aroused by feelings that are in their turn excited by the images and the mood of music. They are beliefs that differ in intensity, importance, and even in content from one person to another. For some the act of believing amounts to abstract affirmation; for others a commitment to devotion; for others casual conformity. The fact that beliefs that are presupposed by faith differ widely is what makes it *possible* for there to be shared *affirmations* about *essentials* and *necessary* for there to be *toleration* of different faiths and of different readings of the same texts.

Levels of Abstraction: The fact that text can itself become quotidian is also what makes broad affirmation about *doctrine* possible. This is illustrated nicely by the previous passage from *East Coker*. At the highest level of abstraction East Coker abstracts from and interprets familiar religious texts, for examples:

¹⁹ Lay up for yourselves not treasures upon earth, where moths and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: ²⁰But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. (KJV Mat 6: 19-29)

¹⁹ The actual text is due to Nikolaus Steinecker, 1572:

*In dieser letzt'n betrubten Zeit
Verleih uns, Herr, Bestandigkeit,
Dass wir dein Wort und Sakrament
Rein b'halten bis unser End.*

²⁰ This raises an interesting question about the relation between music, text and mood. Shall we say that music determines the mood and hence justifies the match of text to music; or shall we say that the mood associated by music is a result of our conditioning; so that, broadly speaking, certain forms of music carry the mind to the sacred or to the profane by virtue of purely musical elements? Proposed answers to this question often take the “either/or” format, but I think that correct answer falls under the “both/and” format. It is difficult to imagine *marching* to a waltz if only because in a waltz the downbeat is kept by alternate steps; whereas in a march the downbeat is always kept by the same foot. Likewise, it is difficult to listen calmly to a piece in tempo 144 if only because 144 is twice the normal heartbeat, and hence is associated with vigorous activity. On the other hand, it is difficult to deny that secular music (say the purely instrumental music of Mozart, Dvorac or Beethoven) carries the mind and heart to their sacred music, like Mozart’s *Requiem* or Dvorac’s *Stabat Mater* or Beethoven’s *Mass in C Major*. Conversely, in some secular music both mood and secular text carry the mind to the sacred; for example the fourth movement of Beethoven’s ninth symphony, where the text of the chorus from Friedrich Schiller is arguably a secularization of religious text.

and

³⁹ He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it. (KJV Mat 10: 39)

These are texts of everyday Christian worship that are captured by the lines of *East Coker* without invoking peculiarly Christian images. I am referring to lines like the following:

In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.

Levels of abstraction apply not only to metaphysical poetry that is evocative of religious faith but also to widely quoted speeches embodying classical wisdom and virtue. For example, the very same couplet above from *East Coker* is easily conceived to be drawn from Socrates' penultimate lines in *Apology*.

When my sons are grown up I would ask you, O my friends, to punish them; ... if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing, -- then reprove them, as I have reproved you, for not caring about what they ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. (Plato/Jowett, 1953, 41e, p. 366)

In a way what makes a poem metaphysical is simply that it concerns itself with objects that are "metaphysical," including beauty, goodness, God, truth, and the soul; yet, metaphysical poetry also seizes upon the familiar and by it arouses feeling. "Quotidian" is a relative term. In certain contexts, biblical or Socratic passages might themselves be part of everyday life, and they too might carry the mind to still loftier abstractions. At its ultimate level, for example in *East Coker*, metaphysical poetry only seems to be disconnected from the familiar. Familiar wisdom can be metaphysical poetry itself, albeit conceived at a lower levels of abstraction; just as it is in the case of the text of *Bleib bei uns* or in the above passages from the *Gospel According to St. Matthew* and *Apology*. At whatever level, metaphysical poetry also expresses the beliefs about value, for example beliefs that arise from the images and story of Agatha or from Donne's poem that crafts the gory image of a beheaded man and likens his death to a broken lute.

Metaphysical poetry is not the only form of metaphysics; indeed metaphysics is itself a sub-discipline of philosophy; since Aristotle, an extremely rigorous and formal sub-discipline of philosophy. Yet metaphysical poetry is much deeper than the orthodoxies of traditional philosophical ontology. Metaphysical poetry is at its deepest and most compelling when it is maximally abstract. At that level its fluidity allows the mind to engage its arguments and come to rest on the objects of its metaphors. Although a true metaphor must be a metaphor *for something*, the something for which it is a metaphor does not proclaim its own truth; it reveals it. On the other hand, the ontologies of traditional philosophy seek *more*; they insist upon literal truth and demand obeisance to it. Whether Aristotle's substance/accident ontology, Platonism, Cartesian rationalism, Kantian critical idealism or contemporary materialism; dogmatic philosophy insists that its uncompromising teachings are not metaphorical, but lay claim to the objectivity that mathematics unquestionably enjoys. Metaphysical poetry demands only the concession that it gestures towards truth through its metaphors, and therefore metaphysical poetry can take satisfaction in metaphor. If language really is "subjective," metaphysical poetry surely gets the better of its ontological rival. For those who place their faith not in the lofty abstractions of Einstein and Spinoza but rather in temporal intimations of the divine; metaphysical poetry and its associated arts turn abstractions into images and mere metaphysical speculation into worship. The vehicle by which that happens is text, and in particular the text of metaphysical poetry, which is inspired by the sublimity of nature and is enlivened and focused by the visual and musical arts that underlie and nourish faith.

Conclusion: This paper has been an exploration of metaphysical poetry and its relation to truth and value. It assumes Eliot's understanding of metaphysical poetry, which insists that metaphysical poetry finds the philosophical in the everyday. Indeed, sometimes metaphysical poetry itself becomes a part of the everyday, and its familiar lines themselves a source of experience that gives rise to further, more abstract poetry. Metaphysical poetry is not the only art form that finds the philosophical in the everyday. We have considered examples drawn from the visual and musical arts. Those arts, when supported by interpretive stories, do the work of metaphysical poetry, and sometimes their morals become metaphysical poetry. Metaphysical poetry and its associated arts do not attempt to *prove* what is, or what might be or what must be. Rather they carry the mind to values by viewing the ordinary from differing perspectives, sometimes familiar and sometimes new. Einstein speaks of the faith of science that its methods will continue to demonstrate truths of nature. Faith in science and religious faith are alike in that they are *commitments* to follow a certain way of thinking and living, which make sense only if their doxastic presuppositions are true. In the case of science, faith will be justified only if only if nature will continue to yield knowledge to scientific investigation; in the case of religion only if its teaching about what is of genuine value and about how to treat each other are validated by an objective standard, which is the divine, or perhaps as Hegel would have said, history's ultimate verdict about the success of the human experience. The beliefs that are presupposed are couched in abstract language, and the language of belief varies from time to time. So, metaphysical poetry and its associated arts ultimately involve an element of uncertainty. That uncertainty is often lamented, but our awareness of the uncertainty of religious belief is redemptive because it reinforces the obvious truth that although religious teachings may be "known by faith," they cannot be not known with the certainty of mathematical proofs, and therefore they cannot be justifiably foisted upon others. It is uncertainty that grounds the rationality of toleration, and it is toleration that saves religion from dogmatism and bloody persecutions; from incorrigible accusations of heresy and apostasy. At the same time, anyone who has an understanding of metaphysical poetry and an appreciation of its supporting arts can hardly remain indifferent to the emotional responses that they prompt. It is virtually impossible to deny that those art forms inspire faith; to commitments about how to live well. One can of course take a completely skeptical view about anything, even natural science as Einstein himself concedes; but many who find meaning in metaphysical poetry and its associated arts find it impossible to reject the religious faith that they inspire and the beliefs presupposed by religious faith. Perhaps it is right to end with a bit of metaphysical poetry: Reason seeks to believe what it cannot find reason to believe, but needs merely what it already believes.

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