

The Perennial Philosophy and the Recovery of a Theophanic View of Nature

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The Forgotten Tradition

We suffer from a peculiar kind of cultural amnesia today. Since the time of the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution, we have increasingly lost awareness of the rich wisdom tradition that for hundreds of years nourished the inner life of contemplatives and seekers of truth. This wisdom tradition is often referred to as the *philosophia perennis* or ‘perennial philosophy’. In both the West and East it is articulated in manifold works of spiritual philosophy, visionary poetry and mystical literature, harboured within pagan, Judaeo-Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist worldviews, and in the oral traditions of many indigenous peoples. While it is expressed in distinctive and different ways, the perennial philosophy articulates truths that are essentially universal and timeless, which help us to understand our place in the cosmos and the deeper purpose of human life.

Central to the perennial philosophy is the recognition that there is a spiritual dimension of existence that is the primary reality from which all of creation derives. All creatures seek to express in their own way this reality, and all of creation seeks ultimately to unite with it. The perennial philosophy reminds us that our fundamental orientation as human beings should be towards spirit, that we should revere the natural world as the manifestation of the divine, and that we should affirm the possibility of an ever more conscious union between ourselves and the spiritual source of existence.

It is important to understand that the perennial philosophy is not a ‘philosophical system’ produced by abstract reasoning. It is primarily an *orientation of the human soul* towards a spiritual dimension that essentially transcends the particular cultures, religious outlooks and historical contexts within which it finds expression. At the kernel of the perennial philosophy is less a set of arguments, concepts or doctrines than the human encounter with the sacred, both in nature and within the human heart. This is why the perennial philosophy is articulated in countless different ways, according to the languages of different religious, philosophical and imaginative milieux. But we nevertheless recognise, shining through these different forms of expression, a deeper level of truth, which derives from an authentic spiritual intuition that has touched, and been touched by, a transcendent source of meaning.

The aim of this essay is to consider how certain insights of the perennial philosophy may contribute to the healing of our current disharmonious relationship to nature and to the remembrance of our human purpose within the natural and spiritual orders. In what follows I shall draw mainly on the Western tradition of the perennial philosophy, found in such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and Thomas Aquinas, and upheld through the ages by Christian contemplatives, and by mystics such as Meister Eckhart. The reason for drawing on this Western tradition is that, for those of us living in the West, it is, after all, our rightful inheritance. And it lies so close to the surface of our forgetfulness that it is, perhaps, still within reach of recall.

The Legacy of the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution

First of all it is necessary to understand how and why the eclipse of the perennial philosophy took place, leading to the collective amnesia that has descended upon us today. Many reasons could be given, but there are two historical occurrences which seem to be of greatest relevance. The first is the enormous upheaval that affected every corner of Western Europe during the Reformation, and the devastating assault on monasticism that was carried out by Reformers in the sixteenth and subsequent centuries. This had the long-term effect of undermining the ideal of the life of prayer and spiritual contemplation, pursued over many generations in the shelter of the monasteries. By providing the protective space in which the inner life could be nurtured, the monasteries had for more than a thousand years fostered a conscious relationship to both the psychic and spiritual dimensions of existence. Their emphasis on moral development, and on the interior life of prayer and contemplation, practised in conjunction with meditation on sacred texts and the discipline of 'holy imagination', had an effect on the whole tenor of medieval society.¹ The monasteries and religious houses were a constant reminder to people to attend to the inner life, to make the inner turn towards soul and spirit. With their destruction, not only did the medieval era effectively come to an end, but the value placed on inwardness also began to be seriously eroded.

The following example might help us to grasp how this erosion of the value of inwardness occurred, with the resultant coarsening of the way in which people approached the understanding of the realities of the spirit. Central to the sacred learning practised in the monasteries was the recognition that there are different levels of meaning and symbolism in Biblical texts. As early as the third century, Origen had argued that just as the human being is composed of body, soul and spirit, so too does all of Scripture have a threefold meaning, deepening as we move from the physical to the psychic, and from the psychic to the spiritual levels of interpretation.² During the Middle Ages, a fourfold interpretation of sacred Scripture was widely adopted, according to which no sacred text could be properly understood unless the reader travelled from its literal to its more subtle allegorical, moral and mystical meanings.³ Since 'the book of nature' was also regarded as a sacred text, the same nuanced sensibility applied to the understanding of nature. When Luther and Calvin asserted that only the literal sense of Scripture is valid, it meant that not only were other levels of meaning in sacred Scripture subverted but so also was the idea that nature, too, could be approached with different levels of understanding that went beyond the merely literal. Thus the Reformation prepared the way for a desacralised knowledge of nature, no longer capable of recognising nature as a manifestation of spirit.⁴

The second historical occurrence which caused the wisdom tradition of the perennial philosophy to be so neglected in modern times was the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century. Prior to the Scientific Revolution, there was a very great reverence for the sages and seers of the past, not only the great prophets of the Old Testament but also pagan philosophers such as Pythagoras and Plato. This is well illustrated in the saying of Bernard of Chartres (who taught in Chartres during the early twelfth century) that we are like 'dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants... we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature.'⁵ This attitude of respect and humility towards the past was typical of the Middle Ages, as indeed it was typical of much earlier historical periods too. In cultures as diverse as ancient Egypt, Greece, and India, we meet a similar belief that the further back in time one reached, one would find that

human beings were nearer to the sources of spiritual wisdom, for in the distant past conditions on earth were more closely aligned to conditions in heaven.⁶

Along with this high estimation of the past there was also, across the same diverse range of cultures and historical epochs, a view of nature as a manifestation of the divine. Whether the divine was conceived in terms of a multiplicity of gods and spirits (as in the great polytheistic cultures both East and West) or as a single divine source (as in the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam) human relationship to the natural world was essentially ‘theophanic’.⁷ Nature was never seen as merely physical – it always mediated a sacred presence, whether of gods, spirits or God.

Both the respectful admiration of the past and the theophanic view of nature were anathema to the founding fathers of the Scientific Revolution. They wanted to make a clean sweep of the past, and were virulently hostile towards the notion that wisdom could be sought and found in the spiritual philosophy of antiquity, transmitted to us in ancient teachings and texts. The attitude of Francis Bacon is typical. In his *Novum Organum*, he pointedly wrote that we should best regard the ancients as like children compared to us adult moderns, so it was a great mistake to give their ideas any credence whatsoever. Descartes held a similarly disparaging view of the ancients.⁸ And so the idea of ‘progress’ – unheard of before the seventeenth century – was conceived as an alternative to the previous reverence for the past. The assertion of this idea involved the denigration of the wisdom tradition that had been handed down through the centuries. And it eventually led to the attitude of most people today that the spiritual teachings of the past are at best of only marginal relevance to contemporary life. Far from it being a mark of culture to know and revere the ‘wisdom of the ancients’, it is a sure sign of swimming against the science-driven, future-oriented current of inevitable progress that is sweeping us all forwards towards ever greater material prosperity and technological sophistication.

The underlying reason for Bacon and Descartes’ campaign against the wisdom tradition handed down to them was that they wanted to establish a new *kind* of knowledge, that not only cut out all reference to ancient authorities but above all re-established knowledge on the basis of what would be useful to human beings. They did not want a knowledge founded on contemplation and religious piety, that invested the world with religious meaning. They wanted a knowledge that would give human beings power to take control of the physical world and bend nature to the service of human ends. Such a knowledge had to be freed of all symbolic and metaphysical content, and be based on experimental observation, systematic research and analysis, for only then might we become – as Descartes put it in his memorable phrase – ‘masters and possessors of nature’.⁹ The new knowledge would prove its value not by bringing us to a deeper spiritual understanding but by increasing our ability to manipulate and control nature in ways both practical and useful, to the greater material advantage of human beings.

Over the next four hundred years, the collective energies of the West were directed towards the achievement of the aims of the new knowledge, with the result that today we reap the benefits of hot baths and flushing toilets, washing machines, motorcars, aeroplanes, electric lights, smartphones and all the other paraphernalia that characterise economically ‘developed’ societies. As more and more countries across the globe seek to claim their share of these benefits, we see ever more clearly the heavy price that the rest of nature pays for them: polluted rivers and oceans, the degradation of the soil to critical levels, forests systematically destroyed, and numerous species of animal and plant in catastrophic decline, with many facing extinction.¹⁰ In this afflicted world, more and more people are crowded into ugly, sprawling cities, with so many areas of

modern life infected by a creeping tawdriness. It has been a heavy price, too, for the inner environment of soul and spirit, which in our extroverted mainstream culture is to a large extent starved and neglected, and increasingly denied. Contemporary champions of the new knowledge, such as Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawking, and Yuval Noah Harari have sought to convince us that there is no reality other than that which has material existence, that human beings are just biological machines, that there is no such thing as the soul, and that there is no transcendent meaning or purpose to human life.¹¹

Here, then, is the legacy of the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution. There can be no doubting the impressive material and technological achievements of the last four hundred years, but neither can we ignore the wrecking of the natural environment and the impoverishment of the inner life of human beings that have been the price paid for these achievements. If we have fallen out of harmony with nature and lost our deeper sense of purpose – lost even our sense of the reality of the spiritual order of existence – these are two aspects of a single phenomenon. The one mirrors the other. The ecological crisis is a symptom of sickness and disharmony in the human soul, which nature mirrors back to us.¹² There can be no technological solution to this inner/outer malaise: it lies beyond the purview of the new knowledge, because this knowledge is based on an ignorance, forgetfulness, or outright rejection of fundamental spiritual truths. Note that these truths, though time-honoured through having been reiterated over millennia, do not belong to the past. They are perennial not because they have been around for a very long time, but because they have a validity that *endures through time*. If we have lost sight of them, it is because we have lost our connection with an order of existence that transcends historical and cultural conditions, and which constitutes a universal and eternal ground of meaning and value.

The Reality of Wholeness

We have seen that the theophanic view of nature, as a manifestation of the divine, was rejected during the Scientific Revolution. It was regarded as having nothing to contribute towards reliable knowledge. From the perspective of the perennial philosophy, the rejection of the theophanic view of nature is the root cause of the ecological crisis that we now face, for it led to the treatment of nature as a mere resource to be exploited without restraint. At this time of crisis, it is imperative that the theophanic view of nature is recovered, but this requires a radical shift in the way we perceive the natural world.

The first step towards this change in perception is that we turn our attention towards the intrinsic wholeness of things. Today we have largely lost sight of wholeness. This is because, central to the project of the Scientific Revolution and the mechanistic philosophy on which it was based, there was an attempt to explain wholes in terms of their parts. Living organisms were treated as conglomerations of parts (conceived in due course in terms of their genetic make-up and biochemistry) put together without any inherent unifying principle, and hence to be understood as if they were machines. On this view, if anything unifies an organism it would not be a non-material principle of wholeness but a purely physical mechanism. The same approach applies to mountains, rivers, seas and forests. They should be regarded as no more than the sum of all the different elements of which they are composed. They do not have an intrinsic identity, character or soul-quality that vouchsafes to them their integrity of being, and for this reason it is all the easier to use, abuse and plunder them.

The wholeness of things was referred to in the older philosophical tradition as their ‘form’. The form is to be understood as the guardian of a creature’s wholeness, and it is contrasted with the

matter out of which a creature is made in the following way: the form gives it *actuality*, whereas the matter exists only as *potentiality* in relation to any given form.¹³ A creature is what it is, not because of its material components, but because of its inherent form. Its form is a non-material organising principle that organises the parts into a coherent unity. As such, it is not reducible to any material determinant (like DNA). Only the matter, not the form, can be subjected to chemical analysis, but the form is none the less real. Indeed it is the underlying reality which invests all the biochemical and physical aspects of an organism with coherence and meaning, just as it invests the matter out of which other entities in nature are composed with their specific qualities. The entity that we call water, for instance, has characteristics that are quite different from the oxygen and hydrogen atoms out of which water is composed.

The form is the non-material foundation of a being that gives integrity, meaning and identity to all its material parts, and to all its characteristic habits, behaviours and gestures. In the Western philosophical tradition, the form is also referred to as the inherent idea or ‘the idea within the thing’ (*universale in re*), by which is meant the inner organising principle that constitutes its intrinsic nature, rather than a concept or theoretical explanation we project onto it. Through grasping this formative organising principle or ‘idea within the thing’ in our thought, and through responding to it in feeling and imagination, we are able to know and relate to the being that stands before us as more than just a conglomeration of material attributes, but as an entity with its own essential integrity.

The recognition of the form is something that comes naturally to poets, and it belongs to the spontaneous, untutored and wonder-filled awareness of nature which many people still have, even though they may feel obliged to consider such awareness unscientific and as making no contribution to real knowledge. From the seventeenth century on, the scientific endeavour regarded experimentation, data-collection and analysis, along with complete reliance on the faculty of analytical reasoning (traditionally referred to as the *ratio*) that functions through calculation and logical deduction as the way to acquiring real knowledge. But this kind of reasoning, augmented to such great effect in modern times by the computing power of electronic technologies, is unable to conceive of wholes as anything more than the sum of their parts. It is not able to penetrate beyond the material surface of things. It cannot countenance the notion that there is a non-material aspect to reality, and so it cannot see the wholeness of things as a living energy. For that, a different kind of cognitive faculty – the faculty of intuitive insight – must be brought to bear. In the Western philosophical tradition, this faculty of intuitive insight is referred to as the *intellectus*, but it is far from being ‘intellectual’ in the modern sense. Thomas Aquinas described the *intellectus* as a faculty of inner perception, for the word *intellegere* means ‘to read inwardly’. And so, he explains, ‘perception by the *intellectus* penetrates to the very essence of things...’¹⁴ We experience it every time we gain imaginative insight into another human, or non-human being, and are able to open ourselves to their inner nature.

Unlike the analytical reasoning of the *ratio*, so readily augmented by the binary intelligence of computer technology, the *intellectus* draws on imagination and inspiration to enhance its ability to enter into the inner being of another creature. To approach nature in this way does not mean that we have to reject the results of scientific enquiry, but it does mean that we must approach these findings from a quite different standpoint. To prioritise the whole over the parts is to affirm the existence of a dimension within nature that is essentially inward. It is the first step towards *restoring inwardness* to nature. In so doing, we give cognitive value to our perception of an essentially non-material aspect of reality that cannot be reduced to physically detectable or measurable components. We acknowledge a different *kind* of reality in our midst, in our everyday

experience. The wholeness of things calls to us. It cries out to be attended to, and to be known and celebrated for what it is in itself, in its inherent integrity.

Recovering the Theophanic View of Nature

All of nature cries out for this turn of our attention towards the kind of knowing that is not based on manipulation and control in order to fulfil our utilitarian needs and desires, but issues from a genuine desire to relate to the creatures with which we share the world as they are in themselves and for their own sake. The affirmation of the wholeness and inherent integrity of creatures is, then, a first step towards restoring a more harmonious relationship to nature. We do not have to be scientists to know the inner nature of other creatures: it is a question rather of how open or closed we are as human beings to the forms and qualitative attributes of the multiple natural phenomena that surround us.

But there is a further step that can be taken. By intensifying our focus on something's innate qualities, we may deepen the experience of 'the idea within the thing' to the point at which the numinous ground of its existence becomes present to our consciousness.¹⁵ Then the spiritual source of the idea, or organising principle, begins to speak to us. This source is not in the sense-perceptible world but in the creative energies out of which the sense-perceptible world unfolds into manifestation. What is sense-perceptible is thus revealed to be the exteriorisation of a deeper, spiritual level of existence. For the creative energies that pour into the world belong to a sphere of reality that is intrinsically numinous, and it is within this numinous sphere of reality that the organizing principles are rooted. Encountered as creative powers, they are traditionally referred to as spiritual archetypes, or 'ideas *prior* to things' (*universalia ante res*).¹⁶

This is of course a quite different kind of knowledge to that pursued by contemporary science. It is sacred knowledge. In the Western philosophical tradition, the spiritual archetypes are conceived as being 'in the mind of God', a phrase which signifies that their provenance is beyond space and time, and that they have a purely spiritual mode of existence before they manifest in any material form. This spiritual mode of existence is as thoughts or ideas within the greater cosmic intelligence, or cosmic *Logos*, which endows them with generative power. As thoughts in the greater cosmic intelligence, they possess a creative potency that human thoughts do not have.

The recognition of the reality of the wholeness of things – as more than just the sum of their parts – thus leads to the recognition of an altogether more interior level of reality, in which mind is understood as the 'container' of matter, rather than the other way round. The notion that there is a universal intelligence at work within creation, that bestows upon it being, order and meaning, does not in itself contradict the findings of science. It only contradicts the philosophical stance of reductionist 'scientism'. To those with eyes to see, our world is not a meaningless chaos but it everywhere displays order and harmony. In such a path of knowledge, so different in its intent from the utilitarian and technological objectives of the 'new knowledge' inaugurated during the Scientific Revolution, the contemplation of nature leads to the opening of the doors of perception to the divine ground of being. It was from such a contemplative indwelling of nature, in which all creatures are apprehended as rooted in God, that the great mystical thinker, Hugh of St Victor, was able to declare: 'all of nature speaks of God'.¹⁷

Hugh's was by no means a lone voice. The theophanic view of nature as a manifestation of spirit, and therefore as sacred, was reiterated over and over again throughout the period before the Scientific Revolution.¹⁸ His saying gives expression to a degree of relatedness and attunement to

nature that strongly resonates with the mystical praise poetry of the Psalms and other Biblical texts, and also with manifold non-Christian religious views of nature worldwide, which see the order of nature as a direct manifestation of the divine.¹⁹ It also resonates with modern holistic approaches to nature, such as that of Goethe, who pioneered a path of knowledge that leads from immersion in the observable characteristics of natural phenomena to a beholding of the spiritual archetypes present within them. For Goethe, the culmination of the act of knowing is an intuition of the spiritual archetype. It enabled him to affirm in the same terms as Hugh: ‘The works of nature are like a freshly spoken word of God’.²⁰

If the natural world fails to speak to us of God (as Hugh puts it) or fails to speak to us in God’s voice (as Goethe would say), this is because we have submitted to a kind of knowledge that, whilst giving us excessive power, has blunted our ability to enter into a selfless relationship with nature. Accustomed to a diminished view of the world from which the divine has been excised, our eyes no longer see, our ears no longer hear, the reality in which we actually live. And herein lies the root cause of the ecological crisis, which mirrors the obtuseness, the alienation, the self-obsession, of the modern/post-modern soul. That is to say, it is precisely through denying the sacred level of knowledge that the scientific-technological mentality has permitted humanity to turn upon nature with such destructive fury. By conceiving the aim of knowledge primarily as being to equip us with greater power over nature, and to enable us to utilise natural resources more effectively for our own benefit, we commit an offence not only against the theophanic reality of nature, but also against ourselves too, as bearers of knowledge.

The Call to Knowledge

The full comprehension of our responsibility as bearers of knowledge constitutes a third step necessary for the recovery of the theophanic view of nature. The traditional understanding of knowledge is that it is essentially a communion of knower and known. The act of knowing, through which we grasp the inner truth of things, cannot occur in isolation from those things, but is an actualisation of two potentialities: on the one hand the potentiality of a thing to be known, and on the other the potentiality of the knower actually to know.²¹ The first potentiality *of a thing to be known* implies that all things not only have an openness to being known, but also that the act of being known affects them, for it raises them in a certain way from a state of potentiality to actuality. When a human being observes them and is able to selflessly contemplate their inner nature, this contributes something to them that no other creature or environmental factor can contribute – the possibility of being perceived as they truly are. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke was intensely aware of the significance of this possibility. In one of his poems, he wrote:

‘Nothing was finished before I perceived it;
What was becoming stood still.’²²

What Rilke here expresses implies that human beings have an obligation towards the world, to bring the thoughts in our minds into conformity with the inner nature of the things we are seeking to know, for then the things known by us achieve a kind of completion that they would not otherwise achieve.²³ There is a certain dependence of the natural world upon being cognised by us. As the Islamic philosopher Averroës declared, the things of this world ‘are oriented in their inner nature toward being known by us: for this knowability is an essential determination and belongs to their real nature.’²⁴

But the obligation also extends to us as knowers. The second potentiality *of the knower actually to know* implies that if we limit the quest for knowledge to what is accessible to the analytical intellect alone and is simply useful to us, to the point even of defining knowledge as that which

demonstrably gives us the power to control and manipulate that which we know, then we fail to realise our true potential as knowers. We fail to fulfil our unique position in the natural order as having the ability to bring into our consciousness an awareness of the essentially sacred being of things. Instead, we create for ourselves an inadequate, diminished view of reality, which may be factually correct, and sufficient for us in the short term to obtain the results that we are looking for but, because our knowledge of things falls short both of *their* full truth and of *our* deeper capacity as knowers, it leads inexorably to disharmony both in the human soul and in nature. The disharmony in the human soul is caused by our ignoring the call to fulfil our own spiritual potential and attend to what is essential, with the consequence that we live blighted by an underlying sense that our lives lack meaning. The disharmony in nature is made manifest in the violent disruption to the natural world due to our treating it simply as a resource to be exploited in order to feed our insatiable hunger – a hunger that is truly for the infinite, but which we falsely identify as lying within the finite domain.²⁵

In his book *Harmony*, H. R. H. The Prince of Wales observes that the greatest problem that faces us today is a ‘crisis of perception’. He writes:

‘It is the way we see the world that is ultimately at fault. If we simply concentrate on fixing the outward problems without paying attention to this central, inner problem, then the deeper problem remains, and we will carry on casting around in the wilderness for the right path without a proper sense of where we took the wrong turning.’²⁶

All things have an inner disposition to be known and stand, as it were, ready and yearning to be known in their truth. There is, then, a specifically human task in the greater ecology of the cosmos to know things in the right way, to know them in the truth of their being, to know them in their divine aspect, ‘*in divinis*’.

The act of knowing is a transformative act that raises the thing known to a higher level of existence. Just as rain and sunshine make plants grow, so the human act of contemplative knowing, in which we perceive things in their divine depth, promotes them towards their own inner reality. This is a deed of illumination on our part, by which we bring to nature the light of conscious recognition of its sacred ground. The act of human knowing is, in other words, part of nature’s ecology, uniquely contributed by us.²⁷ Through it, we prepare creatures for their return to the divine source of their being. As Meister Eckhart said:

‘All creatures enter my understanding that they may be illumined in me. I alone prepare all creatures for their return to God.’²⁸

Such a statement points to the profound responsibility that human beings have, as cognising beings, to hold each creature in special regard, to perceive all things ‘in God’. In this act, the numinous dimension that is at their source becomes present to human consciousness, as in a mirror. Put in theistic language, human consciousness becomes the vehicle or mediator of God’s self-knowledge. Here then is a sacred task that the desperate state of nature today calls on us to undertake.

We cannot fruitfully undertake this task if we conceive the scope of human cognition as limited to the merely problem-solving intellect (the *ratio*), that relies upon evidence-based reasoning, data-analysis and logical argument. This level of cognition may endow us with immense technological power, but it does not lead us into the divine presence. Nor does it fulfil our deeper human potential. This can only occur when through the awakened intuitive insight of the *intellectus*, supported by imagination and inspiration, we indwell the sacred realm of spiritual archetypes, powers and presences. For this level of cognition to arise, the discursive, analytical mind must become still; and then, from this point of stillness, the possibility of achieving

conscious awareness of nature as theophany can be realised. The circle of God's self-knowledge is then completed through us, and we may hope to begin to restore harmony to the world.

Notes

¹ For the interior life of prayer, contemplation and the discipline of 'holy imagination', see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (London: SPCK, 1978), Chapter Five. See also Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985), pp.221-223.

² Origen, *De Prinipiis (On First Principles)*, 4.1.11. in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885).

³ As, for example, in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1947) I, Prologue, Q1, A.10.

⁴ Peter Harrison, 'The Bible and the Emergence of Modern Science' in *Science and Christian Belief*, vol. 18, no. 2 (October, 2006), p.118.

⁵ The source of this saying is Bernard's pupil, John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, 3.4 (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2009), p.167.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp.112-130.

⁷ The word 'theophanic' derives from the two words *theos* meaning 'divine' and *phanos* meaning 'appearance or manifestation'.

⁸ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 1.84, in Sidney Warhaft, ed., *Francis Bacon: A Selection of His Works* (London: MacMillan, 1965), p.356. René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* (Radford VA: Wilder, 2008), p.11, considered that the more people studied the ancients, 'the less fit they are for rightly apprehending the truth.'

⁹ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part 6, in *Philosophical Writings*, edited by Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach (Sunbury-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1970), p.46.

¹⁰ See the recent series of authoritative reports from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) *Regional Assessment Reports*, 26 March 2018.

¹¹ See, for example, Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Random House, 2007), p.411, where he characterises human beings as no more than 'chunks of complex matter' capable of thinking, feeling and falling in love with other 'chunks of complex matter.' Stephen Hawking, in an interview with Ian Sample, published in *The Guardian*, 15th May, 2011, said: 'I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.' Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus* (London: Vintage, 2015), Chapter Three, sees the concepts of God and soul as redundant, and argues that human consciousness is nothing more than electrochemical reactions in the brain.

¹² As Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976), p.9, pointed out many years ago: 'The ecological crisis is only

an externalization of an inner *malaise* and cannot be solved without a spiritual rebirth of Western man.⁷

¹³ Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, II.1.412a, 6-11. See also Thomas Aquinas *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, translated by Kenelm Foster O.P. and Sylvester Humphries O.P. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), II.1, 415, who elucidates:

‘Matter is that which is not as such a ‘particular thing’, but is in mere potency to become a ‘particular thing’. Form is that by which a ‘particular thing’ actually exists.’

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II, 2, Q.8, A.1. The distinction between the *ratio* and the *intellectus* was transmitted from ancient Greek philosophy (c.f. Plato’s distinction between *dianoia* and *nous*) to the Middle Ages by such writers as Augustine and Boethius. From a superficial point of view, it identified the two stages of acquiring knowledge – by first reasoning things out and then gaining understanding or insight. But from a deeper perspective it indicated two different approaches to the pursuit of knowledge – one through argument and disputation, the other through the insights born of contemplation.

¹⁵ The progressive deepening of experience of the form in matter to its numinous ground and spiritual source is described in Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.9 in his treatise *On Intellect, the Forms and Being*. See especially *Enneads*, V.9.3-5. Aristotle outlines the approach in *Physics*, 1.1, where he states that ‘the path of investigation must lie from what is more immediately knowable and clear to us to what is clearer and more intimately knowable in itself’, for thereby we advance ‘toward that which is intrinsically more luminous and accessible to deeper knowledge.’

¹⁶ Traditionally, three different modes of existence of ideas (or ‘universals’) are recognized. The *universalia ante res* are the exemplars or spiritual archetypes that pre-exist the things that exemplify them; the *universalia in rebus* exist within things as the principle of their wholeness; and the *universalia post res* exist as concepts abstracted from things by the human mind. The threefold distinction goes back to Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, and the alignment of the *universalia post res* first with the *universalia in rebus* and then with the *universalia ante res* was the basis of what was essentially a theophanic way of knowing. See, for example, Plotinus, n.15 above, Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, V.4: 84-91, Albertus Magnus, *De Praedicabilibus*, 2.17-25 and Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputate de Veritate (Disputed Questions on Truth)*, Q. 3, A. 1.

¹⁷ Hugh of St Victor, *Didascalicon*, 6.5: ‘Omnis natura Deo loquitur.’

¹⁸ For example, his contemporary, William of Conches, who taught at Chartres, described the experience very beautifully, when he wrote in his *Glossae Super Platonem*: ‘As a stream is to a spring, all things are from the divine mind.’ Quoted in Peter Ellard, *The Sacred Cosmos: Theological, Philosophical, and Scientific Conversations in the Twelfth-Century School of Chartres* (Scranton and London: University of Scranton Press, 2007), p.94 and p.99, n.45. In the following century, St. Bonaventure, *The Mind’s Road to God*, 2.11-13, described the Christian mystical path as leading from the contemplation of creatures to the contemplation of the spiritual principle that is their divine source. Knowledge of nature could not be separated from knowledge of God. See Saint Bonaventure, *The Mind’s Road to God*, translated by George Boas (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), pp.20-21. The same theophanic view of nature is also expressed by Meister Eckhart, for example when he says ‘All things speak God. What my mouth does in speaking and declaring God is likewise done by the essence of a stone.’ See Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, vol.1, translated and edited by M. O’C. Walshe (Shaftesbury: Element Books, 1987), Sermon 22, p.178. For Eckhart’s contemplative approach to nature, see Joseph Milne, ‘Meister Eckhart and the Purpose of Creation’ in *Temenos Academy Review*, 20 (2017), pp.78-90.

¹⁹ See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 2 for a helpful review, from the perspective of the perennial philosophy, of the theophanic understanding of nature in all the major religious traditions.

²⁰ Goethe, Letter to the Duchess Louise von Saschsen, 28th December, 1789, quoted in Rudolf Steiner, *Goethe the Scientist*, translated by Olin D. Wannamaker (New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1950), p.194. For Goethe's scientific method, see Henri Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way of Science* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1996).

²¹ This is how both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas understood it. See Aristotle, *On the Soul (De Anima)*, translated by W. S. Hett (London: Harvard University Press, 1975), 3.2 and 3.8. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, translated by Kenelm Foster, O. P. and Sylvester Humphries, O. P. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), Lectio 2, §591-§596 and Lectio 13, §787-§788. A similar view has been put forward in modern times by Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), Chapters 20 and 21.

²² Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Hours*, translated by Christine McNeill and Patricia McCarthy (Mayfield: Agenda Editions, 2007), p.27.

²³ Knowledge is traditionally understood as an assimilation – literally a 'making equal' or *adaequatio* – of the mind with the thing: *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. Only when this conforming of our minds to the inner nature of things occurs can they be said to be known in the truth of their own being. Thus Aquinas says, 'For every true act of understanding is referred to a being, and every being corresponds to a true act of understanding.' See Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate (Disputed Questions on Truth)* translated by Robert W. Mulligan, S. J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1952), Q. 1, A. 2. Answers to Difficulties, 1. Aquinas' *De Veritate* is the best introduction to the *adaequatio* teaching, especially Q. 1, A. 1-5. See also Pieper, *Living the Truth*, pp.29-35.

²⁴ Averroës, *Brief Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, quoted in Josef Pieper, *Living the Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), p.66. The same understanding lies at the heart of the epistemology of Plato and Aristotle, and also Thomas Aquinas, as Pieper clearly shows (see n.23). See also Joseph Milne, *The Mystical Cosmos* (London: Temenos Academy, 2013), p. 26, who sums it up succinctly:

'The world is not merely passively 'there' but actively revealing something through being there and manifesting itself, and it is this that man is called to know and to engage with.'

²⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis* (London: Temenos Academy, 1999), p.22.

²⁶ H. R. H. The Prince of Wales, *Harmony* (London: HarperCollins, 2010), p.6.

²⁷ For a shining example of the work of illumining nature through contemplative observation, see Craig Holdrege, *Thinking Like a Plant* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2013).

²⁸ Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, translated and edited by M. O'C. Walshe (Shaftesbury: Element Books, 1987), Sermon 56, pp.80-81 (translation adapted).