

SPECIAL DIVINE INSIGHT: ESCAPING THE SNOW QUEEN'S PALACE

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Abstract. Insights play a role in every field that can be called knowledge, but are of particular interest to the philosophy of religion and special divine action. Although these acts of understanding cannot be generated at will, a second person can vastly accelerate understanding by a first person. In this paper, I argue that this catalysis of insight is best attained in a situation of 'second-person relatedness', involving epistemic humility and shared awareness of shared focus. I also argue that this approach provides an appropriate interpretation of Aquinas's account of God's gift of understanding. On this basis, it is specifically the context of second-person relatedness to God, as 'I' to 'you', that is expected to have the most far-reaching impact on understanding of the world. I illustrate the conclusions by means of the story of *The Snow Queen*, by Hans Christian Andersen, drawing also some practical implications for insights in daily life.

I. THE PUZZLE OF INSIGHT

What awaited her there was serious to the degree of sorrow and beyond. There was no form nor sound. The mould under the bushes, the moss on the path, and the little brick border, were not visibly changed. But they were changed. A boundary had been crossed. She had come into a world, or into a Person, or into the presence of a Person. Something expectant, patient, inexorable, met her with no veil or protection between.¹

Research into the questions surrounding special divine action has tended to focus on miracles, but the kind of experience described above is probably more common and arguably more efficacious by the measure of changed minds and lives. Like a light switch being thrown, a door into daylight

¹ C. S. (Clive Staples) Lewis, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups* (London: Bodley Head, 1945), p. 395.

opening into a dark room, or someone who is blind receiving sight, there is a step-change, a shift to a different, larger or higher perspective. Such transformations or ‘epiphany moments’ are often associated today with words that denote one or other of their typical characteristics, such as the German ‘*aha-erlebnis*’ (literally, an ‘aha! moment’) and the ‘eureka effect’, after the exclamation attributed to Archimedes when he realised how to test whether a crown was made of pure gold.² First-person accounts of such experiences also refer to their suddenness, a new ease in solving a problem or positive affect, and a feeling of confidence in being right.³ A common feature of these descriptions, however, is their use of metaphors of unveiling, illumination or sight, such as ‘seeing’ how various facts fit together. For this reason, I refer to the phenomenon that is the focus of this paper by the term ‘insight’.

In the broadest sense, insights play a role in every field that can be called knowledge, whether trivial or profound, theoretical or practical, philosophical or scientific. Breakthroughs in science that could be classified as insights include the *ouroboros* dream of August Kekulé⁴ and the ‘paradigm shifts’ studied in Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.⁵ Insights are also frequently associated with religious experiences, as in the narrative above, and with concomitant new perspectives on the

² Pioneering work on the ‘aha! moment’, as an ‘inner illumination’, was carried out by Karl Bühler, cf. *The Mental Development of the Child, a Summary of Modern Psychological Theory*, trans. by O. A. Oeser, International Library of Psychology, Philosophy, and Scientific Method (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1930), chap. 14. See also Pamela M. Auble and others, ‘Effort toward Comprehension: Elaboration or “aha”?’ *Memory & Cognition*, 7 (1979), 426–34. The term ‘epiphany’ to describe such moments is from the Greek *epiphaneia*, meaning ‘manifestation’ or ‘striking appearance’, a word made famous by the account of the wise men finding the child Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew 2:1–11. The term was adapted to a more secular context in literature principally by the work of James Joyce; see, for example, Zack Bowen, ‘Joyce and the Epiphany Concept: A New Approach’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 9 (1981), 103–14.

³ Sascha Topolinski and Rolf Reber, ‘Gaining Insight Into the “Aha” Experience’, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 19 (2010), 402–5.

⁴ Kekulé claimed that he had discovered the ring shape of the benzene molecule after having a reverie or day-dream of a snake seizing its own tail (an ‘ouroboros’). Although the details remain controversial, the story illustrates a more general lesson of the association of images with new insights in the development of modern chemistry. See Alan J. Rocke, *Image and Reality: Kekulé, Kopp, and the Scientific Imagination*, Synthesis (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁵ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

world that have been a focus of study since at least Wisdom's 'Parable of the Garden.'⁶ At a deeper level, descriptions of insights frequently testify to an intuition that there is something inherently divine about them.⁷ This intuition is well-founded in at least one sense, namely that if there is a personal God with the traditional attribute of divine simplicity, then cognition by God is held to resemble more closely what human persons experience as all-at-once understanding rather than discursive reasoning.⁸ For these and other reasons, insight is a particularly important topic for the philosophy of religion.

Despite its familiarity and extraordinary importance, the direct study of insight has nevertheless long presented inherent and peculiar challenges. Philosophical argumentation generally proceeds by means of discursive reasoning applied to clear and distinct representations of reality, expressed by means of language or logic. By contrast, insight has a sudden, all-at-once quality and is not the conclusion of an argument.⁹

⁶ John Wisdom, 'Gods', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, 45 (1944), 185–206.

⁷ Accounts of insight often somewhat resemble theories of knowledge in terms of divine illumination. See, for example, Robert Pasnau, 'Divine Illumination', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2015, available at: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/illumination/>> [accessed 21 May 2015]. At the time of writing, it is also notable that the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy has no distinct entry on 'insight' or closely related terms, a lacuna that may testify to the inherent challenge of applying the tools of analytic philosophy to this topic.

⁸ See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (*ST*) 1.14.7. Insight is closely related to understanding, and insight has been called an 'act of understanding', cf. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, 5th edition, revised and augmented (Toronto: Published by University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 1988), iii, p. 69. One meaning of understanding is to 'stand under', cf. 'Understand, v', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), available at: <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/212085>> [accessed 21 May 2015].

⁹ For such reasons among others, it has proved impossible to program any kind of computer to generate insights, a major frustration to efforts to create artificial intelligence. For an account of the problems that insight presents to the challenge of artificial intelligence, see, for example, Stuart Shanker, *Wittgenstein's Remarks on the Foundations of AI* (London: Routledge, 1998), chap. 4. This distinction between discursive reasoning, associated with the manipulation of representations of the world, and insights, associated with new presentations of the world, parallels a widely observed asymmetry in the typical operations of the two hemispheres of the brain. Iain McGilchrist has compiled a vast body of evidence that supports the position that use of the left-hemisphere (LH) of the brain is biased toward the use of existing representations and models of the world, of the analysis of parts rather than the perception of wholes,

Instead, insight involves a presentation or a re-presentation of what is known from a 'new perspective' or 'in a new light'.¹⁰ A common visual example of this change of perspective is the illusion made famous by Ludwig Wittgenstein in which one and the same unchanging image, seen initially to be a duck, is suddenly seen as a rabbit (or vice versa).¹¹ More obviously useful examples of insight include common processes of abstraction, for example, suddenly 'seeing' or 'understanding' an accumulating series of data points on a graph as instances of an underlying relationship following a simple geometric law.¹² This new understanding can lead to revised representations of the world and shape new premises and discursive reasoning, but the insight itself is not the result of reasoning of this kind, and true insights may even undermine

and of linear, sequential arguments. By contrast, the use of right-hemisphere (RH) is more closely associated with *gestalt* perception, new presentations, and metaphor, by which words carry over into embodied experience. Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009). See especially ch. 2. Insight has been associated specifically with RH activation, mainly the right anterior temporal area, specifically in the right anterior superior temporal gyrus. Where high levels of restructuring are required, there is also activity in the right prefrontal cortex. See Edward M. Bowden and Mark Jung-Beeman, 'Aha! Insight Experience Correlates with Solution Activation in the Right Hemisphere', *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 10 (2003), 730–37. John Kounios and others, 'The Origins of Insight in Resting-State Brain Activity', *Neuropsychologia*, 46 (2008), 281–91. Simone Sandkühler and Joydeep Bhattacharya, 'Deconstructing Insight: EEG Correlates of Insightful Problem Solving', *PLoS ONE*, 3 (2008), e1459.

¹⁰ The notion that insight is experienced as a new presentation of the world, rather than a manipulation of pre-existing representations, is consonant with its other characteristics. For example, the word 'insight' and other visual metaphors associated with the phenomenon, like the exclamation 'I see', imply the immediate and all-at-once cognition of something new. Moreover, this 'seeing' with the mind is often closely associated with the perception of an object, with the eyes or in the imagination. It is plausible, for instance, that what provoked the famous 'Eureka!' of Archimedes was not immediate knowledge of the steps required to solve the problem, the details of which were presumably elucidated later, but 'seeing' the solution implicitly and inchoately by seeing the water rising up the side of the bath.

¹¹ Hence those studying insight have also taken a particular interest in psychology, especially *gestalt* psychology. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), pt. II.xi.

¹² The 'problem' of induction, made famous by the epistemological framework of David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 4., is another way of expressing the discontinuity between what can be achieved by discursive reasoning and insight. The connection between induction and insight is made, for example, in Lonergan, iii, p. 313.

previous, apparently consistent arguments.¹³ Since it is impossible to model an insight by means of an argument, or to analyse its discrete steps, or to generate an insight at will, those who are interested in promoting or studying insights have to resort to heuristic guidelines without guarantee of success, like trying to conduct experiments on lightning.¹⁴

Such limitations might seem to preclude many fruitful lines of enquiry, but there are still ways to gain insight into insight, albeit usually by indirect methods.¹⁵ For example, although some insights are acquired in social isolation, the quality and rate of acquisition of insights can be increased dramatically in certain social settings. Indeed, teaching has been described as a process of catalysing insights.¹⁶ As a literary example, consider the following passage from Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*,

Kept back as she [Fanny] was by everybody else, his [Edmund's] single support could not bring her forward; but his attentions were otherwise of the highest importance in assisting the improvement of her mind, and extending its pleasures. He knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself. Miss Lee taught her French, and heard her read the daily portion of history; but he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment: he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read, and heightened its attraction by judicious praise. In return for such services she loved him better than anybody in the world except William: her heart was divided between the two.¹⁷

¹³ Galileo's challenge to geocentrism was arguably a case of a true insight raising problems lacking immediate solution; cf. Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, Updated ed. / new introduction by Ian Hacking (London: Verso, 2010).

¹⁴ Rule-of-thumb recommendations include attending to connections, coincidences and curiosities, investigating contradictions, and 'creating breakthrough solutions through the force of desperation', according to Gary Klein, *Everything That Follows Is Different: The Disruptive Power of Insight* (New York: PublicAffairs, U.S., 2013).

¹⁵ I use the term 'indirect' on the basis that insights tend to be studied by means of before and after comparisons, rather than a direct study of the moment itself.

¹⁶ 'Teaching is a vast acceleration of the process of learning. It throws out the clues, the pointed hints, that lead to insights; it cajoles attention to remove the distracting images that obstruct them; it puts the further questions that reveal the need of further insights to complement and modify and transform the acquired stores ...' Lonergan, iii, p. 315.

¹⁷ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. by James Kinsley, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 18.

The use of phrases like ‘recommending books’ and ‘correcting judgment’ in this text indicate at least some of the ways in which one person may help to catalyse the insights of another. As a human person who already ‘sees’ the world in a certain way, the teacher can provide hints, draw attention to key facts, remove distractions, put questions and praise progress towards the goal that the student cannot perceive in advance. Hence a second person can vastly accelerate understanding by a first person.

What, then, are the dispositions of the first person that favour the reception of such insights? The question is of decisive importance to the successful communication of insights from a second human being, and is therefore central to teaching. The question also has the implications, however, for modelling how insights might be communicated from a divine person. As noted previously, accounts of divine revelation and accounts of insight often follow similar patterns, such as their suddenness, all-at-once quality, and a sense of transformation in the way that one perceives the world. Moreover, traditional theism attributes to God the desire that the human person should become God-like.¹⁸ On this basis, God presumably desires to impart divine understanding, but if this cannot be imposed, even by God, then the dispositions of a first person to receive such understanding freely will be decisive for a fruitful outcome.¹⁹ Hence the study of the communication of insights between human persons has a direct relevance to special divine action, at least as it is experienced in a common and efficacious mode. I begin, therefore, by examining the communication of insight by human persons.

II. EPISTEMIC PRIDE, HUMILITY AND LOVE

As a way to clarify the dispositions of a first person that favour the catalysis of insights communicated by a second person, it is helpful to begin by examining the more tractable question of what dispositions tend to block such insights. One obvious answer is that a first person must not already attribute to himself adequate understanding of some

¹⁸ See, for example, 1 John 3:2; 2 Peter 1:4.

¹⁹ The principle that grace, and the concomitant divine gifts such as understanding, can be refused by human choice is an official Catholic teaching (cf. Council of Trent, Decree on Justification, Canon IV) that is also widely held, though not exclusively held, in many non-Catholic circles.

matter, an attribution that would preclude openness to new insights. On this basis, a first inhibition of insight can be defined as follows:

P1: Ascribing to oneself an understanding that one does not possess.

Although this state might seem transparently foolish to those who do possess the understanding in question, it should be noted that its absence may not be apparent to the person who is in this condition. Just as insight cannot be derived, neither can the absence of insight be derived, especially if one already has an internally consistent representation of the world. Moreover, the sense of certainty associated with such representations is often associated with stubbornness. This observation is consistent, as it happens, with a model that treats the right-hemisphere (RH) of the brain as the principal locus of the neural conditions and concomitants of insight, and the left-hemisphere (LH) as the principal locus for representations. Persons making exclusive use of the LH are more likely to insist on some deduction from their representations of the world being correct, even when these results are shown to be wrong,²⁰ although it should be noted that there is a need for caution in interpreting these findings.²¹

A second disposition that would tend to block insights from another would be the self-ascription of the capacity to acquire understanding by one's own reasoning, contrary to one of the core characteristics of an insight. On this basis, a second inhibition of insight can be defined as:

P2: Thinking that one can acquire for oneself some understanding that is received from another.

An objection might be made to this definition, namely that people do in fact acquire understanding of all kinds of matters by working alone. Nevertheless, such capacities would not be possible without a great deal of prior intellectual formation by others, given the vast amount of

²⁰ Michael S. Gazzaniga, *The Integrated Mind* (New York ; London: Plenum, 1978), pp. 148–9. Use of the LH is associated with 'confabulation'; cf. Jaak Panksepp, 'At the Interface of the Affective, Behavioral, and Cognitive Neurosciences: Decoding the Emotional Feelings of the Brain', *Brain and Cognition*, Affective Neuroscience, 52 (2003), 4–14 (p. 10). By contrast, use of the RH seems to make it easier for a person to hold a range of ambiguous possibilities in suspension, which may open a conceptual space for new insights; cf. McGilchrist, pp. 137–141.

²¹ Cf. M. R. Bennett and P. M. S. Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 388–393.

work needed by parents, caregivers and teachers. Moreover, as noted previously, even the insight of a solitary person cannot be willed or acquired through the application of discursive reasoning alone, having instead the character of an unexpected gift, even when this exchange is between what is grasped by diverse faculties of cognition.²² Hence a disposition that inhibits the reception of insights on the basis that one can acquire insights for oneself by one's own choice and reasoning would seem to be extremely debilitating.

At this point, these insight-inhibiting dispositions suggest a pattern that is familiar in virtue ethics, insofar as they follow the basic form of the first two of the four species of pride identified by Gregory the Great and listed by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae* (ST) 2-2.162.4.²³ Given that the first two insight-inhibiting dispositions can be mapped to the first two species of pride, this pattern suggests that it is also worth examining how the remaining species of pride might correspond to additional insight-inhibiting dispositions. On this basis, the third such disposition would be:

P3: Thinking that some understanding to be received from another is due to one's own merits.

A person with this disposition would be aware that insights are to be received from another, but is mistaken about the nature of the relationship with the other person. The mistake is to see this relationship in contractual terms, as if one is owed insights on the basis of what one already possesses or what one can exchange in return. One problem with this attitude, however, is that insights are not commensurate, so it is unclear what would merit a new insight. Moreover, as noted previously, an insight has the nature of an unexpected gift (whether the giver can be identified explicitly or not), for which, for example, one may have to wait patiently without guarantee of success. As a practical example of this disposition in operation, one might imagine the case of an arrogant student who thinks that because he has paid the teacher, or because he

²² Given the tendency of LH-dominated thinking to confabulate (see note 20), it is arguable that something like epistemic humility is needed to accept insights from the appropriate faculty of an individual person, in a manner that has some parallel to the way in which such humility is needed for the communication of insights between persons.

²³ I am adapting here an analysis of the four species of pride carried out in Andrew Pinent, 'Humility', in *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life*, ed. by Michael W. Austin and Douglas Geivett (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 250–255.

thinks that he already knows roughly what the teacher ought to be doing in order to communicate understanding, proves impossible to teach.

The fourth kind of pride has been made famous by one of the parables of Jesus Christ, *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*.²⁴ A Pharisee, praying in the temple, thanks God for his unmerited gift of virtue, but he also thanks God that he, the Pharisee, is not like other men. He is particularly grateful that he is not like the tax collector who is standing at a distance, not daring to raise his head, and simply begging God for mercy. This Pharisee manifests the fourth species of pride defined by Aquinas, the wording of which can be adjusted slightly in a manner appropriate to insight as follows:

P4: Thinking that some unmerited understanding that one has received from another is greater insofar as others do not have it.

On the face of it, once someone has attained some understanding it may seem a matter of indifference whether others have it or not. Hence it may not be clear why P4 would block insights, or whether it is entirely reprehensible anyway, insofar as many would agree that there is some proper satisfaction in being the first to understand some difficult matter. Nevertheless, insights are more enjoyable if shared, and hence it seems a misunderstanding of the nature of insight to find satisfaction in the continuing ignorance of others. Moreover, as insights are cumulative, a state in which others are left ignorant is also self-inhibiting as regards the future enhancement of one's own understanding.

Besides these dispositions, it is plausible that one can also inhibit insights by damaging or diverting the faculty of understanding in various ways. As regards matters pertaining to moral choice, Aquinas cites intellectual 'blindness' and dullness of mind as vices that inhibit understanding, principally by reason of diversion to unworthy matters (*ST* 2-2.15.3). Moreover, as noted previously, social neuroscience has suggested that there are certain neural concomitants, damage to which may make it more difficult to receive insights. Nevertheless, the four dispositions above seem to cover the full range of possibilities for the inhibition of an insight in matters pertaining to moral choice and to a relationship with another from whom one receives insights in the manner of an unmerited gift. Given that their pattern matches that of the genus of pride, one might call these dispositions *epistemic pride*,

²⁴ Luke 18:9-14.

summarised as:

A disposition to attempt to gain understanding inordinately, namely by manipulation of previously-adopted representations of the world and the concomitant exclusion of new presentations received in the manner of a gift.

This definition appears adequate to encompass the four species of epistemic pride, given that P1 and P2 involve manipulation of pre-existing representations of the world, and P3 and P4 involve the exclusion of new presentations of the world received in the manner of an unmerited gift, a gift that properly understood is a joy to share. The term ‘concomitant’ is included because these two sets of two dispositions are also mutually interrelated: the manipulation of previously-adopted representations of the world will tend to exclude openness to new presentations; while an exclusion of new presentations will also constrain understanding to work with the tools of previously-adopted representations.

What then is opposite of epistemic pride? Obviously, its name is *epistemic humility*, but the meaning of humility in general has long presented a challenge to virtue ethics.²⁵ Epistemic humility may therefore be defined most simply in terms of holding back the species of epistemic pride:

A disposition to hold back from attempts to gain understanding inordinately, namely by manipulation of previously-adopted representations of the world and the concomitant exclusion of new presentations received in the manner of a gift.

Nevertheless, for this definition to be adequate it is also important to check not merely what is known to block the communication of understanding, but also how such communication is effected, since the removal of known impediments does not necessarily mean that communication is then possible. How then does a person receive understanding from another in the manner of a gift?

A brief reflection shows that the communication of insight cannot be like receiving an object from someone or sharing facts expressed by a proposition. A fact expressed by a propositional sentence can

²⁵ As is well known, Aristotle found no place for humility in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the disposition is mentioned only once in Plato’s *Laws*, where it is described in the context of friendship with God. According to Plato, loss of humility leads to loss of divine friendship, following which a person quickly leads his city (a city that can also stand for the human soul) to ruin (*Laws* 4.716a-b). See Pinsent, ‘Humility’.

seemingly be dissociated from any particular person, to the extent that the records of such facts can be left quietly undisturbed in libraries for centuries. By contrast, understanding is irreducible to facts and also pertains to a person, as in the cases 'I understand', 'you understand' or 'she understands'. Although understanding can be discussed objectively, as in this paper, it retains this irreducibly personal aspect, even if this aspect is only implicit. How then does understanding bridge the gap between a second person, as in 'You understand', and a first person, as in 'I understand'?

As noted previously in regard to the passage from *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen draws attention to the way in which Edmund communicates understanding by selecting materials, correcting judgments and so on, and these are clearly ways in which insights may be catalysed. Moreover, the sense that Edmund has a greater understanding than hers may encourage Fannie to persevere, insofar as she may then have the confidence that there are new insights to be grasped. Nevertheless, Austen draws attention not only to Edmund's teaching skills but also to the love that informs the relationship, 'She (Fannie) loved him (Edmund) better than anybody in the world except William: her heart was divided between the two.' This use of terms of affection, combined with the description of Edmund's manner of teaching, hints that interpersonal relatedness plays an important role.²⁶ What kind of relatedness then is conducive to the communication of understanding, and how is such communication actualised?

The situation that Austen describes, involving mutual personal presence, is one that has attracted much interest in recent decades, and many studies have emphasised that much of what is communicated is not easily reducible to propositions. Consider, for example, the action of pointing something out in a situation of mutual personal presence. Even this simple action, without words, communicates understanding by abstracting an object from the background of the visual field and indicating that the object is worthy of attention. Moreover, this action is accompanied by at least a momentary shared awareness of shared attention with the other person, often also with a shared 'stance'.²⁷

²⁶ I use the term 'relatedness' rather than 'relation' or 'relationship' as the latter words convey an intimacy or familiarity that may not be present in all pertinent cases. I am grateful to Peter Hobson for making this point to me.

²⁷ By 'stance' I mean what Eleonore Stump has described as a 'conative attitude prompted by the mind's understanding'; cf. Eleonore Stump, 'The Non-Aristotelian

Although seemingly commonplace, pointing has been described as one of the keys by which an infant begins to unlock the meaning of the world,²⁸ such actions being instances of a broader range of phenomena called ‘joint attention’ or ‘second-person relatedness.’²⁹ At a more complex level, the extended dialogue of a teacher and student in a situation of second-person relatedness will often involve the sharing of a complex pattern of stances towards diverse matters, not only by explicit speech (such as pointing out useful books), but also by prosody, non-verbal communication and a variety of other means.³⁰ Such exchanges may help trigger insights, rather as the revelation of fragments of a picture from a new and hitherto unknown perspective may suddenly be interpolated into a whole image. Such a communication of insight might be called *second-person understanding*, in the sense that it is catalysed specifically in the context of joint attention with a second person.

Given the success of teaching at accelerating insights, there is an inherent plausibility in such a model. Nevertheless, the notion that there is genuine second-person understanding, dependent on ‘I-‘you’ relatedness, might seem challenging to test in exchanges between typical adults, given the number of other means of communication and possible causes of insights. What can be done, however, is to look at situations in which second-person relatedness is atypical or inhibited, such as autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), and to see if such conditions are correlated with atypical or inhibited understanding. Under a variety of terms, with

Character of Aquinas’s Ethics: Aquinas on the Passions’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 28 (2011), 29–43 (p. 41).

²⁸ Clara Claiborne Park, *The Siege: The First Eight Years of an Autistic Child (With an Epilogue, Fifteen Years After)* (Boston, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), p. 6.

²⁹ *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. by Naomi Eilan and others (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). I explore the close connection, to the point of interchangeability, between ‘joint attention’ and ‘second-person relatedness’ in Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas’s Ethics: Virtues and Gifts* (New York; Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012), pp. 47–49.

³⁰ There is a vast literature on these matters, the general emphasis of which is the need to think about language not simply in terms of objective symbol use and organization, but as a communicative interaction between persons. See, for example, John T. Nusbaum, ‘Language and Communication’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Neuroscience*, ed. by Jean Decety and John T. Cacioppo, 1st edn (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), pp. 668–79.

many studies going back to Kanner's original description of autism,³¹ research suggests that there is indeed a correlation. For example, those with ASD often focus on local features instead of global patterns,³² suggesting a difficulty in turning many 'trees' into a single 'forest' within which the trees stand.³³ Another commonly reported difficulty is being overwhelmed in social situations or crowded places, consonant with an inability to group and set aside details.³⁴ Other difficulties include a failure to consolidate learning over time and poor predictive abilities, such as a failure to anticipate picking-up by parents and the timing of air puffs to eyes,³⁵ as well as difficulties in grasping the intentions conveyed by social cues.³⁶ All these symptoms can be interpreted as challenges in understanding, insofar as they involve difficulties in relating parts to wholes, or grasping the underlying regularities of the world, or in comprehending the intentions of others. On the other hand, by way of compensation, those with ASD may display superior performance on local tasks, including reduced contextual modulation or interference.³⁷ These many findings suggest that an inability to engage in joint attention also inhibits one of the most common ways in which human persons acquire insights, and perhaps also the dispositions to acquire insights. Hence across a wide variety of phenomena, one of the common characteristics of ASD is underdeveloped understanding.

³¹ Leo Kanner, 'Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact', *Nerv. Child*, 2 (1943), 217–50.

³² See, for example, Uta Frith and Francesca Happé, 'Autism: Beyond "theory of Mind"', *Cognition*, 50 (1994), 115–32; Simon Baron-Cohen, 'The Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 6 (2002), 248–54; Francesca Happé and Uta Frith, 'The Weak Coherence Account: Detail-Focused Cognitive Style in Autism Spectrum Disorders', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 36 (2006), 5–25.

³³ Ning Qian and Richard M. Lipkin, 'A Learning-Style Theory for Understanding Autistic Behaviors', *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 5 (2011). See also Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures: And Other Reports from My Life with Autism*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

³⁴ John Elder Robison, *Be Different: Adventures of a Free-Range Aspergian with Practical Advice for Aspergians, Misfits, Families & Teachers* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2011).

³⁵ Kanner, 'Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact'; Lonnie L. Sears, Peter R. Finn and Joseph E. Steinmetz, 'Abnormal Classical Eye-Blink Conditioning in Autism', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 24 (1994), 737–51.

³⁶ Courtenay Frazier Norbury, Helen Griffiths and Kate Nation, 'Sound before Meaning: Word Learning in Autistic Disorders', *Neuropsychologia*, 48 (2010), 4012–19 (p. 4013).

³⁷ See again, for example, Frith and Happé; Baron-Cohen; Happé and Frith.

This connection between a lack of second-person relatedness and understanding suggests also the need to augment the initial definition of epistemic humility above. As noted previously, epistemic pride impedes openness to insights from another person. At a deeper level, however, the lesson from ASD is that it is not only epistemic pride, as 'pride' is commonly understood, that blocks insights but also a lack of second-person relatedness to others. In other words, it is not only the rejection of insights, but indifference to the person that matters. Strictly speaking, in matters of moral choice these two conditions are correlated, since pride also inhibits second-person relatedness. As cases of ASD show, however, it is also possible to have a lack of second-person relatedness without what one would normally classify as 'pride.' Given its importance, it therefore seems worthwhile to write second-person relatedness explicitly into an augmented definition of epistemic humility as follows:

A disposition to hold fast to second-person relatedness with some giver of understanding, holding back from attempts to gain understanding inordinately, namely by manipulation of previously-adopted representations of the world and the concomitant exclusion of new presentations received in the manner of a gift.

With this definition, it is made clear that the epistemic humility that is conducive to the communication of insights exists in the context of second-person relatedness, and is a disposition not only to prevent the blocking of insights from another, but also to maintain the relation with the other. Moreover, there is another way of describing this relation. Although second-person relatedness can be momentary and is improperly described as 'love,' one can describe it as having the form of the beginning of love defined as friendship, insofar as it involves a momentary sense of union combined with a shared stance, a momentary participation in the good perceived by another.³⁸ One can therefore describe this relatedness as having the disposition, if not the fruition of love. Hence the interrelated dispositions of epistemic humility and love facilitate the reception of understanding from a second person.

³⁸ I have drawn this account from the description of the twofold desires involved in love, i.e. the good of the beloved and unity with the beloved, outlined in Eric J. Silverman, *The Prudence of Love: How Possessing the Virtue of Love Benefits the Lover* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 59.

III. DIVINE SECOND-PERSON UNDERSTANDING

Up to this point, the link between second-person relatedness and insight has been examined in the case of the second person as a human being. As noted in the introduction, however, insight has long been associated with the notion of divine illumination. Given that second-person relatedness between human persons is one way to catalyse new insights, might this be a metaphor for how an interaction with God could catalyse a new insight, as in the opening text? Are those dispositions that are conducive to receiving insights from a human person also conducive to receiving insights from God?

Within the context of classical philosophy, the notion of a relationship between God and human beings that could be described as 'second-personal' is uncommon. Although Aristotle refers to God in the third person, he does not address God as a second person and even denies that it is possible to be friends with God.³⁹ Nevertheless, the account drawn from natural philosophy is not the whole story of purported human interactions with God. A central theme in the history of the Jewish people and in Christianity is the notion of a covenant with God. The use of terms pertaining to marriage as metaphors for these covenants, as well as adultery for breaking them, underlines that they are to be understood in second-personal terms.⁴⁰ Moreover, the grammar of Augustine in the *Confessions*, who writes of God in intimate terms of love as 'I' to 'you', manifests a profound experience of second-person relatedness with God.⁴¹ Although this distinction was not put on a systematic basis until the thirteenth century, the relationship that Augustine articulates is that of a new life that is called 'supernatural' or a *life of grace*. This life of grace is one of second-person relatedness to God, an aspect that is absent

³⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN) 8.7.1158b36–1159a3

⁴⁰ See, for example: Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 3:20; Ezekiel 16:15–19; and especially the book of Hosea, in which the adultery of the prophet's wife, Gomer, signifies the sin of the children of Israel (Hosea 2:2–5; 3:1–5; 9:1) in breaking their covenant with God; in the New Testament see, for example, James 4:4–5. Note that many cultural and religious practices in these traditions also serve to encourage, express or defend the notion of second-person relatedness with God in the manner of a covenant. For example, the notion of a covenant is central to much liturgy and sacrifice, and one can also point to the extensive use of narratives in sacred texts, the unique literary genre that communicates a sense of knowing a person, as well as the emphasis on the face in Christian art, following the Incarnation.

⁴¹ See, for example, Augustine, *Confessions* 10.27.38.

from the Aristotelian *life of nature*, and which is spiritually autistic from a perspective of grace.⁴²

Within the context of this second-person life of grace, a human person is also described as being enlightened by God in various ways. According to Thomas Aquinas, who developed an extremely detailed systematic account of this new life, understanding (*intellectus*) has a twofold aspect. On one hand, there is the intellectual virtue of understanding, which Aquinas equates with the corresponding virtue described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁴³ On the other hand, there is a second and homonymous understanding that is a divine gift, in the context of a life of grace in which humility and *caritas* (divine love or friendship with God) are integral dispositions.⁴⁴ Since all such gifts of the Holy Spirit, as Aquinas describes them, dispose a person to be moved by God in the manner of joint attention, one can consider this gift to pertain to an understanding that a person gains specifically in the context of second-person relatedness with God.⁴⁵ Aquinas uses the metaphor of light to describe the operations of both the virtue and gift, but observes that the light of the gift penetrates to what is needed for supernatural beatitude with God, extending further than the natural light of understanding.⁴⁶ He also illustrates the gift of understanding in implicitly second-personal terms, as when he describes the work of the Holy Spirit as teaching a person all things that are necessary for salvation and cites Jesus Christ enlightening the minds of his disciples about the meaning of the scriptures as they walk side by side together on the road

⁴² The phrase 'spiritual autism' should, of course, be read as a metaphor, just as 'spiritual blindness' has long been a metaphor in theological discourse, without implying that the corporeally blind are spiritually inhibited. As I have argued in detail in Pinsent, *The Second Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics*, especially chapter 2, the vast systematic description of this life of grace developed by Thomas Aquinas is not only organised around divine friendship but has, as its root metaphor, the notion of being moved by God in a second-person way, comparable to shared awareness of shared focus with a human person. So one of the most influential and most detailed articulations of the meaning of the life of grace has as its core principle the notion of second-person relatedness with God, a condition in which the innate 'spiritual autism' of the post-lapsarian human condition is dispelled.

⁴³ *ST* 1-2.57.2.

⁴⁴ The gift of understanding, in contrast to the homonymous virtue of understanding, is described in *ST* 2-2.8. According to Aquinas, all the infused virtues and gifts have the form of divine love (*caritas*) or friendship; cf. *ST* 2-2.23.8.

⁴⁵ See Pinsent, *The Second Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics*, chap. 2.

⁴⁶ *ST* 2-2.8.1 c.; cf. 2-2.8.5 ad 1.

to Emmaus.⁴⁷ This account seems to dovetail well with the narrative with which this paper began, namely the story of someone suddenly seeing the world from a new perspective, not changed visibly, but grasped with a new understanding in presence of a divine person.

So theological accounts of human flourishing include a role for what one might call *divine second-person understanding*. The theological framework for understanding this understanding, however, suggests that it is not merely revelation of a religious idea, or conviction that there is a God, or even some communication with God that is reducible to propositions (like the Ten Commandments) that will be most significant for changes to understanding. The account above suggests that the crucial factor will be a sense of purported second-person relatedness to God, as 'I' to 'you', that is expected to have the most far-reaching impact on a person's understanding of the world. But what is the evidence? Testimonies of such insights are not to be dismissed but are of limited value to those who do not share them, and it is not possible to discern changes in a person's dispositions directly. One can, however, follow the same approach that is taken in the discernment of ordinary virtues, namely extended experience of personal behaviour over time. How then do persons, individually or collectively, understand the world differently as a result of purported divine second-person understanding?

Such an examination would be a massive undertaking to conduct in detail, but by way of an indication of this change, consider the following passage from the Book of Job, chapter 38:

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?⁴⁸

In this passage, God communicates with Job, but principally to underline how Job does not understand the cosmos. Moreover, there is a sense that Job, representing humanity, is cut off from understanding God's interactions with other beings, including the sons of God, the drops of dew (v. 28), the belt of Orion (v. 31), and young lions (v. 38), to whom God relates in a remarkably intimate way.

⁴⁷ *ST* 2-2.8.4; 2-2.8.2.

⁴⁸ Job 38:4-7. I have used the New King James translation.

Consider, by contrast, the following passage taken from one of the earliest Christian documents outside the New Testament. This text is the work of someone whose whole life revolves around the perception of a new covenant with God revealed in the Incarnation, a life in which human beings have themselves received the grace of adoption as children of God, with the gift of the Holy Spirit:

The heavens, revolving under his government, are subject to him in peace. Day and night run the course appointed by him, in no wise hindering each other. The sun and moon, with the companies of the stars, roll on in harmony according to his command, within their prescribed limits, and without any deviation. The fruitful earth, according to his will, brings forth food in abundance, at the proper seasons, for man and beast and all the living beings upon it, never hesitating, nor changing any of the ordinances which he has fixed.⁴⁹

What is striking in this second passage is the calm confidence of the writer, who perceives order and harmony from the largest to the smallest beings, under the authority of God who has become known. The contrast of these two texts is important because they represent a transformation in perceived second-person relatedness to God between a state in which human beings communicate with a remote God, who yet remains veiled, to one in which it is believed possible to see the face of God. With this transformation, the cosmos is not perceived as an accidental assemblage of events, or the operation of some vast, impersonal mechanism, or the work of an unknowable or only partly known divinity (or divinities). On the contrary, this second-person relatedness to God is accompanied by a new understanding of the cosmos as harmonious, law-like, and potentially knowable.⁵⁰ Whatever the veracity of the theological

⁴⁹ The translation is from James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. I, Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867).

⁵⁰ There is some cultural evidence that the loss of a sense of such relatedness is accompanied by a degradation of a sense of order in the cosmos. John Wisdom's 'Parable of the Garden' (in 'Gods', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, 45 (1944), 185–206) can be taken as touching on this theme in a hypothetical way, insofar as two individuals see the same clearing as manifesting order or disorder respectively depending on their stance with respect to the existence of a gardener, but in a practical way one may discern this change in art. Consider, for example, the following six paintings in temporal sequence: Van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece* or *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (1432); Joachim Patinir, *The Penitence of St Jerome* (c. 1518); Pieter Bruegel the Elder,

claims, one can plausibly attribute a new cultural confidence to this change of perspective, a confidence to uncover this cosmic order with an expectation of success.

IV. ESCAPING THE SNOW QUEEN'S PALACE

In this paper, I have argued that second-person relatedness, in the manner of 'I' to 'you', can catalyse a vast acceleration in the quality and number of insights. The communication of such insights depends on the initiative of the second person, but also on certain dispositions of the first person to receive them in the manner of a gift. In particular, there is a need for epistemic humility and a disposition to be moved by another in the manner of joint attention, a manner that takes the form of the beginning of love, the fruition of which is friendship. Within a theological framework, this second-person understanding is also an appropriate metaphor for how God imparts understanding to human persons. Indeed, according to Aquinas, this mode of special divine action can be read as the usual way in which God extends human knowledge in the life of grace, not principally by infusing new facts, but by new understanding.

This analysis might seem esoteric, but the key ideas are illustrated by a remarkably simple but powerful children's story. In *The Snow Queen*, by Hans Christian Andersen, a little boy named Kai has caught evil splinters in his eyes and his heart, the presence of which renders goodness and beauty invisible to him and makes his heart cold. Kai can admire almost nothing any more except the geometric beauty of snowflakes, each of

The Harvesters (1565); Constable, *The Hay Wain* (1821); Van Gogh, *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890) and Pollock, *Enchanted Forest* (1947). Van Eyck's work is perhaps the most theologically perfect symbolic painting of the kingdom of heaven that art has attempted, and what is striking is how the focus on the perfection of the divine life of grace, centred on the divine liturgy, is accompanied by the perfection of nature as the backdrop. In the transition from Van Eyck to Patinir's work, however, there is a diminishment of the life of grace in comparison to the life of nature alone, a theme that is then dominant in the landscape painting of Constable. Then, however, the sense of the perception of nature as an ordered whole seems to break down in the final work of Van Gogh, in which the road goes nowhere, the vertical dimension shrinks, and the creatures in the image become indistinct. Finally, in the work of Pollock, there are no discernable features left. Without making a judgment about the comparative artistic value of these works, what is striking is the way in which the loss of second-person relatedness to God is accompanied ultimately by the most radical transformation in the depiction of nature from harmonious beauty to complete disorder.

which, he claims, is quite perfect and ‘much nicer than real flowers’.⁵¹ He soon meets the Snow Queen, whose kiss is colder than ice and who causes him to forget his childhood friend Gerda, his grandmother, and his home. Kai boasts to the Snow Queen how:

... he knew his multiplication tables, could figure in fractions, and knew the area in square miles of every country in Europe, and what its population was.⁵²

In other words, Kai boasts of his mastery of rationalistic and especially quantitative knowledge. As Kai is making this boast, however, the Snow Queen carries him away to her empty, vast and cold palace, at the centre of which is a frozen lake that the Snow Queen describes as the ‘mirror of reason’. She declares that this is the finest and only mirror in the world. Little Kai, whose heart has almost turned into a lump of ice, sits on the lake arranging and rearranging pieces of ice into patterns, calling this the ‘Game of Reason’. He is trying to put together the pieces of ice into a word (‘Eternity’) that he cannot remember. Only when the little girl, Gerda, finally makes her way into the palace, shedding tears over him, does Kai’s heart melt and the impediment of his sight is removed.

The warmth penetrated to his heart and melted both the ice and the glass splinter in it. He looked at her and she sang the psalm they had once sung together ... Kai burst into tears and wept so much that the grains of glass in his eyes were washed away. Now he remembered her and shouted joyfully, ‘Gerda! Sweet Gerda, where have you been so long? And where have I been?’ ... It was so blessed, so happy a moment that even the pieces of ice felt it and started to dance; and when they grew tired they lay down and formed exactly that word for which the Snow Queen had promised Kai the whole world and a new pair of skates ...⁵³

With this recognition of Gerda and the formation of the word ‘Eternity’, Kai is free to walk out of the palace. Finally, they return to Kai’s grandmother in the warm sunshine, who is reading from her Bible, ‘Whoever shall not receive the Kingdom of Heaven as a little child shall not enter therein.’⁵⁴

⁵¹ H. C. (Hans Christian) Andersen, *The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, trans. by Erik Christian Haugaard (London: Victor Gollancz, 1974), p. 238.

⁵² Andersen, p. 240.

⁵³ Andersen, p. 260.

⁵⁴ Andersen, p. 262. The Scripture is from Mark 10:15 or Luke 18:17, with a close parallel in Matthew 18:3.

Whatever other interpretations can be given, this story of the Snow Queen is a remarkable parable of the inhibition of insight examined previously. Kai has become trapped in an ice cold, rationalistic representation of the world ('the mirror of reason'), trying to manipulate fragments of this representation into a pattern that will transcend these limitations. In this state, he is focusing so hard on trying to solve the puzzle that he sees little else besides these fragments. Hence although Kai thinks he is being clever, he is cut off from other people and closed to new insights. This state is epistemic pride, with the cold symbolising the isolation and hardening of the heart that is concomitant with pride. Only when Gerda's tears melt his heart is he able to see her, and share understanding with her, upon which the puzzle solves itself. In other words, those whose hearts are no longer cold can be moved by another in the manner of joint attention or second-person relatedness. With this relatedness, the form of which is love, the concomitant epistemic humility enables Kai to receive insights that would otherwise be closed to him. With this new understanding, he walks free from the Snow Queen's palace.

What are the practical consequences? The notion that contemporary intellectual life and culture are suffering from a comparative paucity of new insights has been the concern of some influential studies in recent years.⁵⁵ What the present paper underlines is that new insights are not going to arise simply by more carefully honed analyses within existing intellectual frameworks. Such attempts resemble those of the boy Kai, trapped in the Snow Queen's palace and endlessly re-arranging blocks of ice. Instead, given the central role of second-person relatedness to the communication of insights, one can at least try to arrange conditions that are conducive to accepting new insights in the manner of a gift from others. A straightforward practical step can be to get out more, to mix with colleagues in radically different fields, and to listen respectfully and learn from those with different perspectives and expertise.⁵⁶ Amid the deadly earnestness of the modern academy, there is a great need

⁵⁵ See, for example, Lee Smolin, *The Trouble with Physics: The Rise of String Theory, The Fall of a Science, and What Comes Next* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006). See also McGilchrist.

⁵⁶ Cf. Alex Pentland, *Social Physics: How Social Networks Can Make Us Smarter*, Reissue edition (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015), pp. 26–27, 'The most consistently creative and insightful people are explorers. They spend an enormous amount of time seeking out new people and different ideas, without necessarily trying very hard to find

to re-discover the value of intellectual play, especially in dialogue with others, to break the ice of frozen representations that forms so quickly over one's cognition of the world. A theological perspective also suggests the following counterintuitive course of action. If there is a God who desires to communicate understanding with us, then such insights are going to arise principally in the context of practices that foster an 'I – 'you' relationship with God. In other words, one needs to pray.⁵⁷

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the "best" people or the "best" ideas. Instead, they seek out people with *different* views and *different* ideas.'

⁵⁷ I am grateful to the Analytic Theology project at the University of Innsbruck, as well as the intellectual humility project led by Daniel Jayes O'Brien at Oxford Brookes University, both sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation, for the opportunity to present and receive feedback for some of the ideas presented in this paper.

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