



Introduction



A CERTAIN LIGHTNESS IN EXISTENCE

The title and sub-title of this book contain three elements—that of the “Life of the Mind,” that of the “splendor” of the discovery of things, and that of wherein, even in ourselves, all things not ourselves exist, are known. The notion of precisely the “*splendor*” of *discovery* is something that I found in the poet Phyllis McGinley, though it is an ancient idea. It does not merely mean that things exist, or even, as Étienne Gilson once said, that “things exist and I know them.” It includes the additional element that we see a light, as it were, shining through all reality, something that incites us to respond to it, to behold it. There is a radiance to being. All things that are limited to themselves point to what is not themselves.

After I had initially decided on the title of this book, *The Life of the Mind*—I was at first inclined to call it, *The Splendor of Discovery*—a friend in Australia reminded me that this title is also given to a famous two volume study by the great German philosopher, Hannah Arendt. I had to laugh at this reminder as I have on my shelves the first two volumes of this study, devoted respectively to “Thinking” and “Willing.” The final volume, “Judging,” never appeared. Indeed I had reviewed this book.¹ Arendt’s volume titles are



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familiar to anyone who knows Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, or Aquinas. Arendt was indeed most influenced by Augustine, about whom she wrote her doctorate. What could be more insightful than the following sentence: “The true opposite of factual, as distinguished from rational, truth is not error or illusion but the deliberate lie.”²

My “Life of the Mind” is not that of Arendt, of course, but she is right. The lie is opposed to the true statement of *what is*, just as error is opposed to faulty reasoning. The life of the mind is indeed concerned with distinguishing lies from truth, of error from reason. We want to know these things—what is truth? what is error? what is reasonable? what is a lie?—for their own sakes, because that activity of knowing these things is our life; it is our mind. In the end, “the Life of the Mind,” as I hope will become clear, still seems to be the best description of what I have to say here.

This book, be it affirmed in the beginning, lest there be doubt, is not a study about a physical organ called the brain, nor is it a book in logic, of how concepts are related to each other. Any bibliographical or research check on-line or in a library will reveal, besides the Arendt book, numerous other books and papers with this same title, “the life of the mind,” dealing with sundry aspects of knowing or with the physical organ, the brain.

That our minds are alive, that they have a “life,” is a classic philosophic principle. *Vivere viventibus est esse*, that is, the very being of living things is that such things do live. They have a source of motion within themselves, their own peculiar activity. Likewise, some living things, ourselves included, also have minds. The very “life” of beings with intelligence is *to think*, to exercise this intelligence, actively, on *what is*. A knowing being lives most acutely, most vividly, when it thinks about *what is*.

Our minds, it is said, are initially empty, the *tabula rasa*, the empty blackboard, but, even when empty, they are not nothing. It is merely that they, as yet, know nothing until they encounter something not themselves. Mind is a power that actively seeks to know



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something, anything. Perhaps it is necessary to say, at least once, that what knows is we ourselves, the whole of what we are, with or through our minds. Nothing, seemingly, is really complete unless it is also known, almost as if to say that all things have two existences, a real one and a mental one, though the mental one is a reality, a quality, of a real existing being who thinks. Yet, we can evidently know something but not really be moved by it. Chesterton once said, in a memorable phrase of which I am inordinately fond, that there is no such thing as an uninteresting subject, only “uninterested” people. There is nothing that is too unimportant to know. Everything reveals something.

The very condition of our humanity, then, is to endure the risk of not knowing something worth knowing. The “whole universe may dwell in our minds,” as Aquinas remarked. For this indwelling is the purpose for which we are given minds. What makes it all right to be a particular human being, a truly tiny and finite creature in this vast universe, is that, because we have intelligence, the universe is itself also given back to each of us, without our knowing taking anything away from others knowing the same thing in the same universe. What is given besides ourselves seems initially given that we might simply behold it. This is what Aristotle meant when he defined the mind as that power that is capable of knowing all things. This primarily contemplative moment does not imply that we have no further purpose or that we cannot act in the world for our own immediate and ultimate purposes, but it does imply that *what is* antedates our own finite.

This is a book about thinking and reading, about thinking while reading, about being aware and being delighted in the very acts of either reading or thinking. It is, if you will, a book in the famous *artes liberales*, in the “liberal arts.” That is, it deals with those things that free us to be what we are, what we are intended to be, beings who know, who know *what is*, who delight in this knowing. We are not to be afraid of the splendors in things, except perhaps in the fear





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that, granted our finiteness and, more darkly, our reluctant wills, we may miss some of them.

Some advice will be found here about what to read, why to read. At the end, there is, yes, even though I have many other such lists, a particular book list designed to “waken” our minds. If there is a sense of urgency, of not wanting to miss anything, even if, till now, we have missed many things, it is not set over against the leisure in which we have time for things. We want to know things that are beyond ourselves, that are not ourselves, almost as if this knowing others is part of knowing ourselves, as I think it is. We are not given ourselves as if we were only to be concerned with ourselves. Yet, we are receivers; we are given things that we might know them. We are even told to “know ourselves,” no mean feat as the history of philosophy and our own experience teaches us.

Indeed, as I shall often suggest, we cannot and do not know ourselves unless we first know what is not ourselves, know almost anything really. We become “alive” in the intellectual sense by knowing even the humblest thing, no less than the greatest, both of which can fascinate us. But both the great and the small we can also choose to ignore, even reject. We suspect that there is a connection between the highest of things and the lowest, and what is in-between, among which latter, if we are wise, we place ourselves. The Greeks, indeed, called us “the mortals,” the beings who die and, uniquely, know that we die. They also called us the *microcosmoi*, the tiny (micro), individual beings in whom somehow the whole of creation exists, in all its levels, matter, life, sense, mind.

Indeed, I will even suggest that, paradoxically, there is a danger in not being delighted with our knowing of *what is*. We are to be pleased about those things which are, in their own order, pleasing. It is a perversion of both mind and heart to think that somehow *what is*, is not also given to us. I am bold enough to maintain, with Belloc, that even while walking, we can and do encounter the things *that are*. There is a “metaphysics” in the privilege of walking on this



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green earth. It may be advantageous, moreover, to have had a “bad education,” as Phyllis McGinley tells us, if it leads us to seek out what we missed. Plato is quite careful not to rush us along too soon in our learning. He implies that our relatively little time as mortals is enough time to accomplish, make manifest, what we are. We do not, as we recall from the end of the *Republic*, have an opportunity to choose our “daimon,” our destiny, a second time. We are given one life. It is enough.

This is, as it were, a book for those who, while being educated, often with the highest credentials, were not exposed to the highest things and who, in spite of it all, suspect that they are lacking something. This book follows on my previous books on what can be broadly called “education and reality”—*Another Sort of Learning*, *A Students’ Guide to Liberal Learning*, and *The Unseriousness of Human Affairs*.

One chapter hints that we need “to take care of our own wisdom.” Another talks about the “whole risk of being a human being,” the risk, as it were, is that we are given so much but do not realize it. Yes, we can choose to miss what is there. This is not an “academic” book, though, hopefully, it is an intelligent one. If there is a certain lightsomeness in these considerations, it is because there is *a certain lightsomeness in existence itself*, something we miss at our peril. Things do “depend” on a philosophy that knows *of what is, that it is*

This is not a “self-help” book, to recall Walker Percy’s acerbic and delightful *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*.³ Even less is it a book of “self-reliance” or “self-transcendence” or “self-interest.” It is rather a book of wonder, of amazement that something really exists, including one’s-self. I am much taken by the “order of things,” both that there is order and that I can know it, discover it. I do not “make the world,” but find it already there, already what it is. Hence, I speak of “discovery,” not “make.” It is a great comfort, on honestly knowing ourselves, to acknowledge that we does not cause *what is* to be. And if I speak of the “life of the mind,” I do not mean that this life is unrelated to or totally independent of the life of the senses



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within the body. We exist as a whole. We are single beings both in what we are and in what we know.

Thus, I begin with a reflection on Sertillanges famous book *The Intellectual Life*, because such a life is something we all can and want to strive for, even the humblest of us. Thomas Aquinas, perhaps the best mind of our kind, did not hesitate to spend time with the slower of his brothers in teaching them what they could know. But he himself spent most of his waking hours on careful, profound, incisive explication of *what is*. He did not neglect any source of information that is available to us, including that of revelation.

Does this book have a “practical” purpose? Will it help me get into graduate school, or get a better job, or run for office? Not really. It is largely addressed to what is impractical about us, to what has to do with knowing, not doing, granted their intimate relationship. The “doing” that I envision is not merely the desire to find a book, to read it. It is to feel our soul moved by what is not ourselves, by the truth, by *what is*. Plato, in a famous passage in his Seventh Letter, warned us about writing, about how its set words could conceal what it is that they are meant to reveal or convey. He claimed that he never wrote what he really thought. He told us that he only wrote Socratic dialogues, though he did unexpectedly tell in the *Symposium* that he did know something about love. In reading Plato’s dialogues, we should, hopefully, be led to the vision that he had, if we be philosophers.

St. Thomas also understood that we can never fully understand or state the whole truth of anything or of everything. Yet, he thought that we could and should say what it is we know, realizing, with Socrates, that the reality will be more than our words and concepts. Both Plato and Thomas set us on an adventure, a search, a quest simply to know. If we have allowed ourselves to be dulled, to be deflected from reality, these pages, it is hoped, will serve to awaken us, to resume in our souls that vocation we all have to know, as best we can, *what is*.