CHAPTER SIX

Illusion and Reality

I

I suppose it has been a fairly central (if not always ostentatiously prominent) theme of this book that we should not mistake our ways of seeing the world for the world as it truly is. To which I might also add: we should not mistake every pronouncement made in an authoritative tone of voice for an established truth. Regarding the ultimate nature of reality, at least, neither the general consensus of a culture nor the special consensus of a credentialed class should be trusted too readily, especially if it cannot justify itself except by reference to its own unexamined presuppositions. So much of what we imagine to be the testimony of reason or the clear and unequivocal evidence of our senses is really only an interpretive reflex, determined by mental habits impressed in us by an intellectual and cultural history. Even our notion of what might constitute a "rational" or "realistic" view of things is largely a product not of a dispassionate attention to facts, but of an ideological legacy. To some extent, something of the sort is true of most of our larger convictions about the world. If we examine

the premises underlying our beliefs and reasoning honestly and indefatigably enough, we will find that our deepest principles often consist in nothing more—but nothing less—than a certain way of seeing things, an original inclination of the mind toward reality from a certain perspective. And philosophy is of little use here in helping us to sort out the valid preconceptions from the invalid, as every form of philosophical thought is itself dependent upon a set of irreducible and unprovable assumptions. This is a sobering and uncomfortable thought, but also a very useful reminder of the limits of argument, and of the degree to which our most cherished certitudes are inseparable from our own private experiences.

I find it helpful, at any rate, to keep this in mind when trying to make sense of the current debates regarding belief in God. I have to admit that I find it impossible to take atheism very seriously as an intellectual position. As an emotional commitment or a moral passion—a rejection of barren or odious dogmatisms, an inability to believe in a good or provident power behind a world in which there is so much suffering, defiance of "Whatever brute and blackguard made the world," and so forth—atheism seems to me an entirely plausible attitude toward the predicaments of finite existence; but, as a metaphysical picture of reality, it strikes me as a rank superstition. I cannot imagine how it is possible coherently to believe that the material order is anything but an ontologically contingent reality, which necessarily depends upon an absolute and transcendent source of existence. To me, the argument for the reality of God from the contingency of all composite and mutable things seems unarguably true, with an almost analytic obviousness; and all philosophical attempts to get around that argument (and I am fairly sure I am familiar with all of them) seem to me to

lack anything like its power and lucidity. And the same is true in only slightly lesser degree of the argument from the unity, intentionality, rationality, and conceptual aptitudes of the mind, or the argument from the transcendental structure of rational consciousness. Even so, I must ruefully admit, I would be deceiving myself if I did not acknowledge that my judgments follow in large part from a kind of primal stance toward reality, a way of seeing things that involves certain presuppositions regarding, among other things, the trustworthiness of reason. Ultimately, though, I know that, if the materialist position is correct, there can be no real rational certainty regarding ontological questions, or regarding anything at all; so the very assumption that what seems logically correct to me must in fact be true already presumes part of the conclusion I wish to draw.

There, however, my generosity of spirit on the matter is exhausted. True enough, all of us derive our pictures of the world from certain fixed principles that we take as self-evident but can neither prove nor disprove, either empirically or dialectically. If, however, there is any legitimacy at all to the elementary categories of logic or to the discriminatory powers of the intellect (and I think we have to believe there is), we can certainly say which perspectives on reality possess greater or lesser *relative* logical strength and internal consistency. So it is more than fair to point out that philosophical naturalism is among the most irrational and arbitrary visions of reality imaginable. This much is clear simply from the arguments typically made in its favor, all of which tend to be nothing more than catechetical assertions. Consider, for instance, the very popular but also purely doctrinaire claim that the principle of "the causal closure of the physical" precludes all possibility

of supernatural agency in the world: an entirely tautological formula, warranted by neither reason nor science. It is indisputably true, admittedly, that any closed physical system that might happen to exist is by definition both physical and closed, but there is no compelling reason to think that our reality is such a system. And, anyway, a "closed" physical system still could not be the source of its own existence, and so would be truly closed only at the mechanical level, not the ontological; its existence would still have to be explained in "supernatural" terms. By the same token, claims that incorporeal realities could not affect material processes, or that any notion of disembodied consciousness (such as God's) is incoherent, or that the physical order is demonstrably devoid of final causality, and so on, are all just so many empty assertions masquerading as substantive arguments. As for the asseveration that naturalist thought has proved its cogency in the success of the modern sciences, this is simply a confusion of issues. Between the triumphs of the inductive, empirical, and theoretical sciences of the modern age (on the one hand) and the metaphysical premises of naturalist thinking (on the other), any association is entirely a matter of historical accident and nothing more. Empiricism in the sciences is a method; naturalism in philosophy is a metaphysics; and the latter neither follows from nor underlies the former.

The most egregious of naturalism's deficiencies, however, is the impossibility of isolating its supposed foundation—that strange abstraction, self-sufficient nature—as a genuinely independent reality, of which we have some cognizance or in which we have some good cause to believe. We may be tempted to imagine that a materialist approach to reality is the soundest default position we have, because supposedly it can be grounded in empirical experience: of

the material order, after all, we assume we have an immediate knowledge, while of any more transcendental reality we can form only conjectures or fantasies; and what is nature except matter in motion? But this is wrong, both in fact and in principle. For one thing, we do not actually have an immediate knowledge of the material order in itself but know only its phenomenal aspects, by which our minds organize our sensory experiences. Even "matter" is only a general concept and must be imposed upon the data of the senses in order for us to interpret them as experiences of any particular *kind* of reality (that is, material rather than, say, mental). More to the point, any logical connection we might imagine to exist between empirical experience of the material order and the ideology of scientific naturalism is entirely illusory. Between our sensory impressions and the abstract concept of a causally closed and autonomous order called "nature" there is no necessary correlation whatsoever. Such a concept may determine how we think about our sensory impressions, but those impressions cannot in turn provide any evidence in favor of that concept. Neither can anything else. We have no immediate experience of pure nature as such, nor any coherent notion of what such a thing might be. The object has never *appeared.* No such *phenomenon* has ever been observed or experienced or cogently imagined. Once again: We cannot encounter the world without encountering at the same time the being of the world, which is a mystery that can never be dispelled by any physical explanation of reality, inasmuch as it is a mystery logically prior to and in excess of the physical order. We cannot encounter the world, furthermore, except in the luminous medium of intentional and unified consciousness, which defies every reduction to purely physiological causes, but which also clearly

corresponds to an essential intelligibility in being itself. We cannot encounter the world, finally, except through our conscious and intentional orientation toward the absolute, in pursuit of a final bliss that beckons to us from within those transcendental desires that constitute the very structure of rational thought, and that open all of reality to us precisely by bearing us on toward ends that lie beyond the totality of physical things. The whole of nature is something prepared for us, composed for us, given to us, delivered into our care by a "supernatural" dispensation. All this being so, one might plausibly say that God—the infinite wellspring of being, consciousness, and bliss that is the source, order, and end of all reality—is evident everywhere, inescapably present to us, while autonomous "nature" is something that has never, even for a moment, come into view. Pure nature is an unnatural concept.

It is also, one should recall, a concept whose shape has altered over time, in accord with intellectual fashions. Over roughly the last four centuries, Western culture has become accustomed to viewing nature as a collection of organic and inorganic machines and mechanical processes: mindless matter fortuitously or cunningly arranged into elaborate devices, immense or minuscule, elegant or atrocious. This has always been an unfortunate choice of metaphors. Mechanistic imagery may have served some sort of paradigmatic purpose in the epoch of Newtonian physics, or may have aided early modern "natural philosophers" in formulating a model of empirical research free of teleological suppositions; but physics has moved on since then, and organisms are not machines. Living systems grow, unfold, change, regenerate, and *act* in ways that machines do not and can only occasionally be made to mimic; and organisms that possess any degree of conscious awareness are

endowed with powers that transcend any merely mechanical function. Really, the mechanical philosophy never had any but a practical and dispensable part to play in the formation of modern scientific method. Modern science is concerned with isolating facts about the physical order and organizing them by way of certain theories, and then with testing theories against observable facts, and so must be by its nature narrow, rigorously exact, tentatively inferential, and endlessly corrigible. All that mechanistic models of nature ever contributed to this tradition was an imaginative picture of the kind of boundaries that ought to be drawn around the proper areas of scientific inquiry. The inductive ideal was an interrogation of nature limited to a specific set of physical interactions and a specific kind of simple causality, isolated for study by the exclusion of all "metaphysical" or "religious" questions regarding purpose, intention, meaning, value, subjectivity, existence, and so on—the exclusion, that is to say, of consciousness and all its products.

When, however, the mechanistic metaphor began to acquire a metaphysical status of its own, it had to begin striving to eliminate its rivals. As a mere adjunct to a method, the mechanical philosophy really should have been nothing more than a prescription of intellectual abstinence, a prohibition upon asking the wrong sorts of questions; transformed into a metaphysics, however, it became a denial of the meaningfulness of any queries beyond the scope of the empirical sciences. Mysteries that might require another style of investigation altogether—phenomenology, spiritual contemplation, artistic creation, formal and modal logic, simple subjective experience, or what have you—were thus to be treated as false problems, or confusions, or inscrutable trivialities. This created some-

thing of a difficulty. Since the mechanical philosophy was an approach to nature that excluded all terms peculiar to consciousness, it had no way of fitting the experience of consciousness back into its inventories of the physical order. Hence, the metaphysical ambitions of scientific naturalism inevitably required that everything that in the past had been regarded as belonging inalienably to the mental or spiritual realm would have to come to be seen as, if not simply illusory, at least entirely reducible to the sorts of mindless processes the sciences are competent to discern. In this way, the limits of scientific inquiry—as a result, I suppose, of the irrepressible will to power that corrupts most human enterprises—had come to be equated with the limits of reality.

But the history (and pathology) of the "scientistic" creed has been recounted many times before and needs no elaboration here. It is enough simply to note how painfully absurd the consequences of such thinking have often proved. At a moment in intellectual history when there are a good number of theorists not only willing, but eager, to deny the reality of unified, intentional consciousness—an absolute certainty upon which all other certainties depend—it is depressingly clear that behind the putative rationalism of scientific naturalism there lurks an ideological passion as immune to the dictates of reason as the wildest transports of devotional ecstasy could ever be.

II

Sometimes, when reflecting on the current state of popular debates over belief in God, I think of Aubrey Moore (1848–1890),

the Anglican theologian, Oxford tutor, and occasional botanist who eagerly championed Darwinism in his theological writings, in great part because he believed it might contribute to a general recovery of a properly Christian understanding of God and creation. As a scholar of ancient and mediaeval Christian thought, Moore cordially detested the modern, essentially deistic picture of reality—derived from the most unfortunate philosophical and religious developments of the previous three centuries—which portrayed God as merely some supreme being presiding over a cosmos that he had constructed from inert elements outside himself. In Darwin's thought, however, he believed he had found a far nobler conception of the creative potentialities inherent in nature, one worthy of a God who is both the transcendent actuality and the indwelling Logos of all things, in whom all things live and move and have their being. It was a vision of life's mystery that he hoped might help to lead the way beyond the mechanical metaphors and silly anthropomorphisms inherited from a metaphysically degenerate age.

History, however, is destiny. Moore's reasoning was sound enough, but what actually happened was that, for the most part, Darwinism was simply assumed into the mechanical narrative. Rather than inaugurating some penitential return of Christian culture to a metaphysically more sophisticated concept of creation, it was chiefly interpreted (by believers and unbelievers alike) as simply a new explanation of how the machinery of living organisms had been assembled, with natural selection cast in the role previously occupied by an "Intelligent Designer." This was unavoidable. A scientific theory may radically alter our understanding of certain physical processes or laws, but only rarely will it have the

power to affect our deepest imaginative and intellectual habits. This is why, as I observed far above, much of what passes for debate between theist and atheist factions today is really only a disagreement between differing perspectives within a single post-Christian and effectively atheist understanding of the universe. Nature for most of us now is merely an immense machine, either produced by a demiurge (a cosmic magician) or somehow just existing of itself, as an independent contingency (a magical cosmos). In place of the classical philosophical problems that traditionally opened out upon the question of God—the mystery of being, higher forms of causality, the intelligibility of the world, the nature of consciousness, and so on—we now concern ourselves almost exclusively with the problems of the physical origin or structural complexity of nature, and are largely unaware of the difference.

The conceptual poverty of the disputes frequently defies exaggeration. On one side, it has become perfectly respectable for a philosophically illiterate physicist to proclaim that "science shows that God does not exist," an assertion rather on the order of Yuri Gagarin remarking (as, happily, he never really did) that he had not seen God while in orbit. On the other side, it has become respectable to argue that one can find evidence of an Intelligent Designer of the world by isolating discrete instances of apparent causal discontinuity (or ineptitude) in the fabric of nature, which require the postulate of an external guiding hand to explain away the gap in natural causality. In either case, "God" has become the name of some special physical force or causal principle located somewhere out there among all the other forces and principles found in the universe: not the Logos filling and forming all things, not the infinity of being and consciousness in which all things nec-

essarily subsist, but a thing among other things, an item among all the other items encompassed within nature. The only question at issue, then, becomes whether this alleged causal force or principle really is a component of physical reality, and the only way of adjudicating the matter is to look for evidence of "divine" intervention in nature's technological structure. That, however, is not a question relevant to the reality of the transcendent God, and for this reason it has never been treated as such in the philosophical traditions of classical theism. It is rather as if a dispute over the question of Tolstoy's existence were to be prosecuted by various factions trying to find him among the characters in *Anna Karenina,* and arguing about which chapters might contain evidence of his agency (all the while contemptuously ignoring anyone making the *preposterous* or *meaningless* assertion that Tolstoy does not exist at all as a discrete object or agent within the world of the novel, not even at the very beginning of the plot, and yet is wholly present in its every part as the source and rationale of its existence). If there is some demiurge out there, delicately constructing camera eyes or piecing together rotary flagella, he or she is a contingent being, part of the physical order, just another natural phenomenon, but not the source of all being, not the transcendent creator and rational ground of reality, and so not God. By the same token, if there is no such demiurge, that too is a matter of utter indifference for the question of God. How, after all, could the existence or nonexistence of some particular finite being among other beings provide an ultimate answer to the mystery of existence as such?

Perhaps, however, it is a mistake to presume good will here. It may be the case that not every party in these debates is especially willing to acknowledge the qualitative difference between ontologi-

cal and cosmological questions. A devout physicalist is likely to find it not merely convenient but absolutely necessary to believe that the mystery of existence is really just a question about the physical history of the universe, and specifically about how the universe may have arisen at a particular moment, as a transition from a simpler to a more complex state within a physical system. At least, it often seems pointless to try to convince such persons that none of the great religions or metaphysical traditions—absolutely *none* of them—thinks of the "creation of the universe" simply in terms of a cosmogonic process, and that the question of creation has never simply concerned some event that may have happened "back then," at the beginning of time, or some change between distinct physical states, or any kind of *change* at all (since change occurs only within things that already exist), but has always concerned the eternal relation between logical possibility and logical necessity, the contingent and the absolute, the conditioned and the unconditioned. And I suspect this is not simply because they are incapable of understanding the distinction (though many are) but also because they have no desire to do so. The question of being is not one that physics can shed any light upon at all, and so the physicalist has no choice but persistently—even sedulously—to fail to grasp its point. To allow the full force of the question to break through his or her intellectual defenses would be, all at once, to abandon the physicalist creed.

Here, however, I suppose one has to exercise a degree of sympathetic tact. Materialism is a conviction based not upon evidence or logic but upon what Carl Sagan (speaking of another kind of faith) called a "deep-seated need to believe." Considered purely as a rational philosophy, it has little to recommend it; but as an emo-

tional sedative, what Czeslaw Milosz liked to call the opiate of unbelief, it offers a refuge from so many elaborate perplexities, so many arduous spiritual exertions, so many trying intellectual and moral problems, so many exhausting expressions of hope or fear, charity or remorse. In this sense, it should be classified as one of those religions of consolation whose purpose is not to engage the mind or will with the mysteries of being but merely to provide a palliative for existential grievances and private disappointments. Popular atheism is not a philosophy but a therapy. Perhaps, then, it should not be condemned for its philosophical deficiencies, or even treated as an intellectual posture of any kind, but recognized as a form of simple devotion, all the more endearing for its mixture of tender awkwardness and charming pomposity. Even the stridency, bigotry, childishness, and ignorance with which the current atheist vogue typically expresses itself should perhaps be excused as no more than an effervescence of primitive fervor on the part of those who, finding themselves poised upon a precipice overlooking the abyss of ultimate absurdity, have made a madly valiant leap of faith. That said, any religion of consolation that evangelically strives to supplant other creeds, as popular atheism now does, has a certain burden of moral proof to bear: it must show that the opiates it offers are at least as powerful as those it would replace. To proclaim triumphally that there is no God, no eternal gaze that beholds our cruelties and betrayals, no final beatitude for the soul after death, may seem bold and admirable to a comfortable bourgeois academic who rarely if ever has to descend into the misery of those whose lives are at best a state of constant anxiety or at worst the indelible memory of the death of a child. For a man safely sheltered from life's harder edges, a gentle

soporific may suffice to ease whatever fleeting moments of distress or resentment afflict him. For those genuinely acquainted with grief, however—despair, poverty, calamity, disease, oppression, or bereavement—but who have no ivory tower to which to retreat, no material advantages to distract them from their suffering, and no hope for anything better in this world, something far stronger may be needed. If there is no God, then the universe (astonishing accident that it is) is a brute event of boundless magnificence and abysmal anguish, which only illusion and myth may have the power to make tolerable. Only extraordinary callousness or fatuous sanctimony could make one insensible to this. Moreover, if there is no God, truth is not an ultimate good—there is no such thing as an ultimate good—and the more merciful course might well be not to preach unbelief but to tell "noble lies" and fabricate "pious frauds" and conjure up ever more enchanting illusions for the solace of those in torment.

No need to argue over the point, however. Religions of consolation belong principally to the realm of psychology rather than that of theology or contemplative faith. At that level, all personal creeds—whether theist or atheist—stand beyond any judgments of truth or falsehood, morality or immorality, rationality or irrationality. One cannot quarrel with sentiment, or with private cures for private complaints. It probably makes no better sense to contest popular atheism on logical grounds than it does to take a principled stand against the saccharine pieties of greeting cards with "religious" themes. In either case, what is at issue is neither belief nor unbelief (at least not in any intellectually important sense) but only the pardonable platitudes of those trying to cope with their own disaffections and regrets. What makes today's popular athe-

ism so depressing is neither its conceptual boorishness nor its self-righteousness but simply its cultural inevitability. It is the final, predictable, and unsurprisingly vulgar expression of an ideological tradition that has, after many centuries, become so pervasive and habitual that most of us have no idea how to doubt its premises, or how to avert its consequences. This is a fairly sad state of affairs, moreover, because those consequences have at times proved quite terrible.

III

Every age has its special evils. Human beings are (among many other things, of course) cruel, rapacious, jealous, violent, self-interested, and egomaniacal, and they can contrive to make nearly anything—any set of alleged values, any vision of the good, any collection of abstract principles—an occasion for oppression, murder, plunder, or simple malice. In the modern age, however, many of the worst political, juridical, and social evils have arisen from our cultural predisposition to regard organic life as a kind of machinery, and to treat human nature as a kind of technology—biological, genetic, psychological, social, political, economic. This is only to be expected. If one looks at human beings as essentially machines, then one will regard any perceived flaws in their operations as malfunctions in need of correction. There can, at any rate, be no rationally compelling moral objection to undertaking repairs. In fact, the machine may need to be redesigned altogether if it is to function as we think it ought. The desire to heal a body or a soul can lead to horrendous abuses, obviously, especially when

exploited by powerful institutions (religious or secular) to enlarge their control of others; but it is also, ideally, a desire that can be confined to sane ethical limits by a certain salutary dread: a tremulous reluctance to offend against the sanctity and integrity of nature, a fear of trespassing upon some inviolable precinct of the soul that belongs to God or the gods. This is not true of the desire to fix a machine. In the realm of technology, there is neither sanctity nor mystery but only proper or improper function.

Hence certain distinctively modern contributions to the history of human cruelty: "scientific" racism, Social Darwinism, the eugenics movement, criminological theories about inherited degeneracy, "curative" lobotomies, mandatory sterilizations, and so on—and, in the fullness of time, the racial ideology of the Third Reich (which regarded human nature as a biological technology to be perfected) and the collectivist ideology of the communist totalitarianisms (which regarded human nature as a social and economic technology to be reconstructed). No condition is more exhilaratingly liberating for all the most viciously despotic aspects of human character than an incapacity for astonishment or reverent incertitude before the mysteries of being; and mechanistic thinking is, to a very great extent, a training in just such an incapacity. This is why it is silly to assert (as I have heard two of the famous New Atheists do of late) that the atheism of many of those responsible for the worst atrocities of the twentieth century was something entirely incidental to their crimes, or that there is no logical connection between the cultural decline of religious belief at the end of the nineteenth century and the political and social horrors of the first half of the twentieth. Yes, certainly, a mere absence of belief in God, in the abstract, does not dictate any particular

politics or moral philosophy; but, in the concrete realm of history, even essentially innocent ideas can have malign consequences. Atheism is a not merely an attitude toward an isolated proposition regarding some particular fact or other, like whether fairies exist or whether the velocity of neutrinos is consistent with the speed of light, but is instead a conceptual picture of the whole of reality, with inevitable philosophical implications. As such, it opens up a vast array of ideological, practical, and cultural possibilities that other ways of seeing reality would preclude. It is no aspersion upon all those cheerful, goodhearted, kindly atheists out there, who long for a just and compassionate social order and who would never so much as speak harshly to a puppy, to note the great "religious" theme running through the ghastly chronicles of twentieth-century barbarism. In the absence of any belief in a transcendent purpose in life or in an eternal standard of moral truth, the great task that opens up before many imaginations is that of creating some ultimate meaning out of the imperfect—but perhaps corrigible—materials of human nature. Rather than living for a kingdom not of this world, found only in eternity, and rather than surrendering to the absurdity of our accidental universe, we must now apply ourselves to the "heroic" labor of creating the future, wresting a higher and better human reality out of the refractory materials of a defective species, even if that should require completely reconstructing the machine (genetically, racially, socially, politically, economically, psychologically . . .).

In any event, that should all be too obvious to need pointing out. And I am not making any allegations regarding something uniquely perfidious in naturalist thinking. Like most metaphysical creeds, materialism can be translated into a huge variety of cultural

and social expressions, many of them quite benign. One ought not to *blame* materialism for the greatest evils committed under its aegis, any more than one ought to blame, say, Christianity for the Crusaders' sack of Jerusalem or for Torquemada's malevolence (and who would be so wretchedly simplistic as to do that?). The belief that we are ultimately only biological machines, erected upon a chemical basis according to inabrogable physical law, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that we should seek to engineer a master race or a perfect society. That said, considering the matter in reverse order, looking from conclusions to premises, the fact remains that the grand political projects of destruction and reconstruction that imbrued such vast regions of Europe and Asia in human blood in the last century presupposed a very particular concept of nature and humanity, and a very particular range of imaginable futures. Again, every ideology opens its own special space of possibilities. And it is most definitely an ideology that is at issue here. We ought to remember that the mechanical philosophy arose not just as a new prescription for the sciences, unrelated to any of the more general cultural movements of its time, but also in association with a larger Western project of human mastery over the world: the great endeavor to subject nature to impediments and constraints (to use the language of Bacon) or even to "rack" or "torture" nature in order to force her to yield up her secrets (to use the more savage language of Leibniz). The belief that nature is essentially machinery is a license not only to investigate its organic processes but to disassemble, adjust, and use it as we see best. The early modern period was, after all, the great age of conquest: of territory, of "less advanced" peoples or races, even of nature itself; it was the age of nationalism, political absolutism, colonialism, the

new imperialism, and incipient capitalism, a period in which it seemed possible, for the first time ever, that human power might one day extend to the farthest reaches of terrestrial reality.

Not even the sciences could escape the force of this new, intoxicatingly audacious cultural aspiration. As I noted above, the alliance between inductive or empirical method and the new mechanical metaphysics was a matter principally of historical accident, not of logical necessity. Once that alliance had been struck, however, it was inevitable that the quiet voice of empirical prudence would have to give way to stentorian proclamations of the limitless scope of the sciences, and of the emptiness of any questions the sciences cannot answer. The discourse of power is, of its nature, bombastic, pontifical, and domineering. And, in one of its uniquely modern inflections, the discourse of power involves the claim that all truth is quantitative in form, something measurable, calculable, and potentially within the reach of human control (if not practical, at least theoretical). Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)—a morally problematic figure, admittedly, but not to be dismissed—was largely correct in thinking that the modern West excels at evading the mystery of being precisely because its governing myth is one of practical mastery. Ours is, he thought, the age of technology, in which ontological questions have been vigorously expelled from cultural consideration, replaced by questions of mere mechanistic force; for us, nature is now something "enframed" and defined by a particular disposition of the will, the drive toward dominion that reduces the world to a morally neutral "standing reserve" of resources entirely subject to our manipulation, exploitation, and ambition. Anything that does not fit within the frame of that picture is simply invisible to us. When the world is seen this way, even

organic life—even where consciousness is present—must come to be regarded as just another kind of technology. This vision of things can accommodate the prospect of large areas of ignorance yet to be vanquished (every empire longs to discover new worlds to conquer), but no realm of ultimate mystery. Late modernity is thus a condition of willful spiritual deafness. Enframed, racked, reduced to machinery, nature cannot speak unless spoken to, and then her answers must be only yes, no, or obedient silence. She cannot address us in her own voice. And we certainly cannot hear whatever voice might attempt to speak to us through her.

For what it is worth, though, the age of the great totalitarianisms seems to be over; the most extreme and traumatic expressions of the late modern will to power may perhaps have exhausted themselves. Now that the most violent storms of recent history have largely abated, the more chronic, pervasive, and ordinary expression of our technological mastery of nature turns out to be simply the interminable spectacle of production and consumption, the dialectic of ubiquitous banality by which the insatiable economic culture of the late modern West is shaped and sustained. And this, I think, is how one must finally understand the popular atheist vogue that has opened so lucrative a niche market in recent years: it is an expression of what a Marxist might call the "ideological superstructure" of consumerism. Rather than something daring, provocative, and revolutionary, it is really the rather insipid residue of the long history of capitalist modernity, and its chief impulse—as well as its chief moral deficiency—is bourgeois respectability. Late modern society is principally concerned with purchasing things, in ever greater abundance and variety, and so has to strive to fabricate an ever greater number of desires to grat-

ify, and to abolish as many limits and prohibitions upon desire as it can. Such a society is already implicitly atheist and so must slowly but relentlessly apply itself to the dissolution of transcendent values. It cannot allow ultimate goods to distract us from proximate goods. Our sacred writ is advertising, our piety is shopping, our highest devotion is private choice. God and the soul too often hinder the purely acquisitive longings upon which the market depends, and confront us with values that stand in stark rivalry to the one truly substantial value at the center of our social universe: the price tag. So it really was only a matter of time before atheism slipped out of the enclosed gardens of academe and down from the vertiginous eyries of high cosmopolitan fashion and began expressing itself in crassly vulgar form. It was equally inevitable that, rather than boldly challenging the orthodoxies of its age, it would prove to be just one more anodyne item on sale in the shops, and would be enthusiastically fêted by a vapid media culture not especially averse to the idea that there are no ultimate values, but only final prices. In a sense, the triviality of the movement is its chief virtue. It is a diverting alternative to thinking deeply. It is a narcotic. In our time, to strike a lapidary phrase, irreligion is the opiate of the bourgeoisie, the sigh of the oppressed ego, the heart of a world filled with tantalizing toys.

IV

In any event, no matter how we describe the historical forces that have given us our late modern picture of the world, we have arrived at a cultural situation strangely removed from that imme-

diate sense of the mysterious surfeit of being over beings—that wonder at the ineradicable difference between the "that it is" and the "what it is" of the world—that opens thought to the true question of the transcendent God. The mind unlearned in reverence, says Bonaventure (1221–1274), is in danger of becoming so captivated by the spectacle of beings as to be altogether forgetful of being in itself; and our mechanistic approach to the world is nothing but ontological obliviousness translated into a living tradition. We have spent centuries laboriously learning how not to see the simplest and most immediate of truths about reality, which every child grasps without possessing the concepts necessary to name it. It may be that we can make proper sense of talk about God (as opposed to talk about the demiurgic god of modern belief and unbelief) only to the degree that we free ourselves from that legacy. And the best way to escape the comfortable familiarity of an inherited picture of reality is to try to return to something more original, more immediate: to retreat from one's habitual interpretations of one's experiences of the world and back to those experiences themselves, as unencumbered as possible by preconceptions and prejudices. Admittedly, there is no such thing as *pure* immediacy of experience, entirely devoid of any act of interpretation; but we can certainly attempt to liberate our thinking from all those accretions of cultural and personal history that, except in a few fugitive moments, prevent us from remembering the world, so to speak—from recalling what is uncanniest and therefore most illuminating in our primordial wakefulness to the mystery of being. God, according to all the great spiritual traditions, cannot be comprehended by the finite mind but can nevertheless be known in an intimate encounter with his presence—one that requires considerable dis-

cipline of the mind and will to achieve, but one also implicit in all ordinary experience (if only one is attentive enough to notice).

Many of us today, of course, tend to be suspicious or disdainful of appeals to personal experience. This too is part of the intellectual patrimony of modernity. Nor is it an entirely unfortunate condition: a certain degree of canny skepticism in regard to claims made on the basis of private feelings or ineffable intuitions or episodic insights is a healthy thing. But our ideological tradition takes us far beyond mere sane discretion in such matters, and makes us prone to a rather extreme form of the "verificationist" fallacy, the exquisitely self-contradictory conviction that no belief can be trusted until it has been proved true by scientific methods. Today, there are seemingly rational persons who claim that our belief in the reality of our own intentional consciousness must be validated by methods appropriate to mechanical processes, mindless objects, and "third person" descriptions. The absurdity of this becomes altogether poignant when one considers that our trust in the power of scientific method is itself grounded in our subjective sense of the continuity of conscious experience and in our subjective judgment of the validity of our reasoning. Even the decision to seek objective confirmation of our beliefs is a subjective choice arising from a private apprehension. At some very basic level, our "third person" knowledge always depends upon a "first person" insight. In a larger sense, moreover, most of the things we actually know to be true are susceptible of no empirical proof whatsoever, but can only be borne witness to, in a stubbornly first person voice. We know events and personalities and sentiments better and more abundantly than we know physical principles or laws; our understanding of the world consists in memories, direct encounters,

accumulated experiences, the phenomenal qualities of things, shifting moods, interpretations formed and reformed continually throughout the course of a life, our own tastes and aversions, the sense of identity each of us separately possesses, and innumerable other forms of essentially personal knowledge. Certainly private consciousness can be deceived, confused, diminished, or deranged; if we are wise, we submit our judgments to the judgments of others, offer our testimony expecting to be challenged by those who have very different tales to tell, learn to distinguish opinion from insight and impulse from reflection, rely upon the wisdom of others, cultivate an aptitude for doubt, and so on. Nevertheless, there remains in each of us an unshakable ground of resolute subjective certainty, which forms the necessary basis of all rational belief. The world that appears *in* consciousness is the only world of which we have anything like immediate assurance. This being so, it would be positively insane to relinquish our confidence in, say, our sense of our own free will, or in the privacy of our qualitative experiences, or in the unity of consciousness, or even in the transcendental reality of goodness or beauty, and so on, simply because this materialist orthodoxy or that pseudoscientific theory urges us to do so. We are not condemned to absolute subjectivity, but our direct experience of reality has to possess an altogether primary authority for us, which may need to be qualified by further experience but which can never be wholly superseded.

I think one has to take a fairly radical line here, to be honest. I am not talking principally about extraordinary experiences, of the sort that might challenge most persons' expectations of what is possible or impossible; but neither would I want to exclude such experiences from the realm of rational belief. It may be wise to be

as caustically skeptical as one can in regard to stories about miraculous events, for instance, but not on the emptily dogmatic grounds that such things simply cannot occur. According to David Hume's famous argument for rejecting all reports of the miraculous, miracles are by definition violations of those laws of nature to which the experience of all persons at all times gives universal attestation, without exception; hence, the weight of evidence is preponderantly against any claim that those laws have been violated in some single instance, and logic dictates that all such claims be regarded as products of ignorance, credulity, pious fraudulence, or wishful thinking. Actually, it is a rather feeble and circular argument in a great many ways, and it amounts to little more than an assertion that what is exceptional is incredible because it is not ordinary, and that ostensible miracles are to be disbelieved on the grounds that they would be miraculous. Still, Hume is correct on the quite obvious and uncontroversial point that reports of miracles are, on the whole, implausible and usually ought not to be accepted uncritically. Even so, if one were to hear such a report from the lips of a witness with whom one has had a long personal acquaintance, and whose probity, intelligence, scrupulousness, perspicacity, and perhaps holiness one believes indubitable, then it would be entirely irrational to reject that report simply because one imagines that one knows that the event in question is intrinsically impossible. One cannot observe a law of nature, much less a law that could govern how nature and supernature are related to one another; one can observe only regularities and irregularities, the common and the uncommon; and among the criteria by which one would judge what to believe or disbelieve one would have to include one's experience of the regular and common traits of the

person claiming to have witnessed an irregular and uncommon event. Again, one must rely on one's own experience, because there is no purely objective arbiter of credibility in these (or any) matters. And this is even more true, perhaps to an almost absolute degree, in cases where one is not merely challenged to believe another's report of a seemingly impossible event, but confronted by one's own experience of such an event. If one believes one has, on an occasion or two, in circumstances that make deception or delusion more or less impossible, witnessed an event for which the "laws" of nature cannot account (and I suppose I should draw the veil of authorial discretion here and decline to say whether I have ever found myself in this situation), it would not be reason that would dictate that one refuse to believe one's experiences and choose instead to embrace the dogmas of a naturalist metaphysics. Logic would demand belief in the miraculous, at least provisionally; only blind faith in the impalpable and unprovable abstractions of materialism would demand disbelief instead.

My concern here, however, is not with miracles, though the issue is extremely interesting in the abstract (after all, one confirmed miracle would be sufficient to disprove naturalism altogether, whereas all the regularities of natural events throughout all time, taken together, are not enough to prove it). I might just as well confine my observations to the experience of private prayer, and note that, if one feels a firm conviction that one has entered into real communion with the presence of God when praying, those who dismiss such convictions as emotional delusions have no rational arguments on their side. Knowledge of any reality is to be sought out in terms appropriate to the kind of reality it is. The empirical and theoretical sciences grant us the means of understand-

ing vast regions of the physical order, but only in terms of physical processes; they tell us nothing about the innumerable other dimensions of reality—starting with the most fundamental dimension of all, existence as such—that constitute our knowledge of, judgments about, and orientations toward the world. In most essential spheres of inquiry, the sciences are not only subordinate, but also infinitely inferior, to the arts, to spiritual practices, to metaphysical speculations, to logical exercises, to moral reasoning, and perhaps to informed guesses. This remains true even when empirical research can disclose physical concomitants of the realities at issue. About a decade ago, for example, frissons of excitement coursed through certain journalistic quarters when Michael Persinger and Faye Healey claimed to have proved, with the aid of an outlandish contraption that came to be known as the "God Helmet," that religious experiences could be induced by a weak electromagnetic stimulation of the brain's temperoparietal regions. Surely this meant, many concluded, that all such experiences were nothing more than fantasies arising from neurological agitations. As it happened, a team of researchers at Uppsala University later completely discredited Persinger's and Healey's studies, but it would hardly have mattered had some synaptic throne of God really been discovered in the brain. No one truly doubts that states of consciousness are associated with events in the cerebral cortex. There are certainly neurological activities attendant upon religious or mystical experiences—how could there not be?—but in no way does that imply that such experiences are *nothing but* neurological activities. Certain brain events attend the experience of seeing a butterfly or of hearing a violin as well, but that ought not lead us to conclude that butterflies and violins are only psychological fictions.

That religious experience can be induced in part by one's physical state is scarcely any great secret. It is precisely because mental states rest upon a physiological foundation that all the established contemplative traditions insist that one must undertake physical disciplines, many of them quite ascetic in nature, if one is to detach one's mind from the distractions of daily existence and penetrate the surface of normal perception, to see what may be found in the hidden depths of things.

It is good to keep this in mind if one really wants to discuss the search for God, or simply the issue of whether there is a God to be sought. Any search, if it is to be successful, must be conducted in a manner fitted to the reality one is looking for. I happen to think that reason alone is sufficient to compel assent to some sort of formal theism, at least insofar as reason is to be trusted; but that still leads only to the logical postulate of God, which may carry with it a certain arid certitude, but which is in no sense an actual knowledge of God. However great the force of a rational conviction may be, it is not yet an experience of the truth to which that conviction points. If one is really to seek "proof" one way or the other regarding the reality of God, one must recall that what one is seeking is a particular experience, one wholly unlike an encounter with some mere finite object of cognition or some particular thing that might be found among other things. One is seeking an ever deeper communion with a reality that at once exceeds and underlies all other experiences. If one could sort through all the physical objects and events constituting the universe, one might come across any number of gods (you never know), but one will never find God. And yet one is placed in the presence of God in every moment, and can find him even in the depth of the mind's

own act of seeking. As the source, ground, and end of being and consciousness, God can be known *as God* only insofar as the mind rises from beings to being, and withdraws from the objects of consciousness toward the wellsprings of consciousness itself, and learns to see nature not as a closed system of material forces but in light of those ultimate ends that open the mind and being each to the other. All the great faiths recognize numerous vehicles of grace, various proper dispositions of the soul before God, differing degrees of spiritual advancement, and so forth; but all clearly teach that there is no approach to the knowledge of God that does not involve turning the mind and the will toward the perception of God in all things and of all things in God. This is the path of prayer—contemplative prayer, that is, as distinct from simple prayers of supplication and thanksgiving—which is a specific discipline of thought, desire, and action, one that frees the mind from habitual prejudices and appetites, and allows it to dwell in the gratuity and glory of all things. As an old monk on Mount Athos once told me, contemplative prayer is the art of seeing reality as it truly is; and, if one has not yet acquired the ability to see God in all things, one should not imagine that one will be able to see God in himself.

V

Contemplative prayer can be, I should point out, an extremely simple thing. It often consists in little more than cultivating certain habits of thought, certain ways of seeing reality, certain acts of openness to a grace that one cannot presume but that has already been granted, in some very substantial measure, in the mere

givenness of existence. It is, before all else, the practice of allowing that existential wonder that usually comes to us only in evanescent instants to become instead a constant inclination of the mind and will, a stable condition of the soul rather than a passing mood. There are also, however, more advanced stages of contemplation, which require one to enter into the depths of the self, into one's own "heart," and here the final state that one seeks is nothing less than a union in love and knowledge with God. Among those who are especially suspicious of religious ecstasies or enthusiasms, the word "mysticism" can often conjure up odd images of emotional frenzies, or "prophetic" hallucinations, or occult divinations, or something of the sort. If one consults the vast literature produced by the world's mystical traditions, however, though one may come across the occasional visionary or clairvoyant (an exceedingly rare and marginal phenomenon), the feature one finds to be most conspicuously common in the contemplative experience of the divine is clarity. For the most part, the spiritual life is one of sobriety, calm, lucidity, and joy. The life of contemplative prayer invariably includes episodes of both profound dereliction and exorbitant ecstasy; as the mind gradually rises out of the constant flow of distraction, preoccupation, self-concern, and conflicting emotion that constitutes ordinary consciousness, one can swing between extremes of sorrow and joy, between (to use the Sufi terms) the crushing forsakenness of *qabd* and the expansive delight of *bast.* But these are neither acute emotional disturbances nor fits of derangement but merely passing states of the soul, moments of moral and temperamental clarity, necessary phases in the refinement of one's experience of reality into a habitual transparency of the mind and will before the "rational light" that fills all things.

Nearly all traditions seem to agree, in fact, that even the raptures one experiences in first breaking free from the limits of normal consciousness are transient, and must be transcended if one is to achieve the immeasurably fuller and more permanent delight of mystical union with God. To a very great extent contemplative prayer involves the discipline of overcoming, at once, both frantic despair and empty euphoria, as well as a long training in the kind of discernment that allows one to distinguish between true spiritual experience and mere paroxysms of sentiment. This is the art of what Sufi tradition calls *muraqaba,* attentive care and meditative "watchfulness"; it requires the sort of scrupulous examination of one's own mental and emotional states described with such precision by Evagrius Ponticus (345–399), Maximus the Confessor, and countless other writers. In Christian tradition, the mystical ascent to God has often been described as a passage (with many advances, retreats, saltations, and reversions) through distinct phases of purgation, illumination, and union: a process by which the contemplative is stripped of selfish attachments and finite emotional supports, then filled with happiness and insight and luminous confidence in God's indwelling presence, and then borne entirely beyond the circumscriptions of the self to dwell in God. Other traditions also speak of the different stages of spiritual progress in analogous, if differently inflected, terms. In every tradition, however, there seems to be clear agreement that one can reach the proper end of the spiritual life only through an ardent persistence in devotion, which outlasts whatever ecstatic elations and shattering despondencies may arise and melt away again. For the Christian contemplative, even the delights of spiritual illumination must be superseded by the beatitude of mystical union, the transfiguring

experience of *theosis,* or "divinization," in which one is made a vessel of the divine nature. For the Vedantist, the bliss of spiritual peace, achieved through intense devotion and meditation, is still not the bliss of *turiya,* release in the pure consciousness of the divine. For the Sufi, the ecstasy of *fanaa fillah,* dissolution or annihilation in God, must terminate in *fanaa al-fanaa,* an "annihilation of annihilation" in the supreme happiness of *baqaa billah,* the state of abiding constantly in God.

It is not my intention, however, to produce a treatise on contemplative prayer. The literature of mysticism is abundant and comprehensive and, in many instances, ravishingly beautiful, and I surely have nothing of consequence to add to it; and I am not qualified to write in the guise of a spiritual guide for others. My principal purpose here is to point out again, yet more insistently, that one cannot meaningfully consider, much less investigate, the reality of God except in a manner appropriate to the kind of reality God has traditionally been understood to be. Contemplative discipline, while not by any means the only proper approach to the mystery of God, is peculiarly suited to (for want of a better word) an "empirical" exploration of that mystery. If God is the unity of infinite being and infinite consciousness, and the reason for the reciprocal transparency of finite being and finite consciousness each to the other, and the ground of all existence and all knowledge, then the journey toward him must also ultimately be a journey toward the deepest source of the self. As Symeon the New Theologian was fond of observing, he who is beyond the heavens is found in the depths of the heart; there is nowhere to find him, William Law (1686–1761) was wont to say, but where he resides in you; for Ramakrishna (1836–1886), it was a constant refrain

that one seeks for God only in seeking what is hidden in one's heart; for God, as a Sufi of my acquaintance tirelessly reminds his students, is both the most outward of realities (*al-Zahir*) and the most inward (*al-Batin*). The contemplative seeks to be drawn ever more deeply into the circle of divine being, consciousness, and bliss, the circle of God knowing and delighting in the infinity of his own essence. The practice of contemplative prayer, therefore, is among the highest expressions of rationality possible, a science of consciousness and of its relation to the being of all things, requiring the most intense devotion of mind and will to a clear perception of being and consciousness in their unity.

It was more or less for this reason that the great scholar of mysticism Evelyn Underhill, in her somewhat mordant moments, seemed to regard materialist thinking as a form of barbarism, which so coarsens the intellect as to make it incapable of the high rational labor of contemplative prayer. Certainly the literature of every advanced spiritual tradition bears witness to rigorous regimes of scrutiny and reflection and mental discipline, in light of which the facile convictions of the materialist can appear positively childish, even somewhat "primitive." We late moderns can be especially prone to mistake our technological mastery over nature for a sign of some larger mastery over reality, some profounder and wider grasp of the principles of things, which allows us to regard the very different intellectual concerns and traditions of earlier ages or of less "advanced" peoples as quaintly charming or attractively exotic or deplorably primitive or unintelligibly alien, but certainly not as expressions of a wisdom or knowledge superior to our own. But there really is no such thing as general human progress; there is no uniform history of enlightenment, no great comprehensive

epic of human emergence from intellectual darkness into the light of reason. There are, rather, only local advances and local retreats, shifts of cultural emphasis and alterations of shared values, gains in one area of human endeavor counterpoised by losses in another. It may well be, in fact, that it is precisely the predominance of our technological approach to reality that renders us pathetically retrograde in other, equally (or more) important realms of inquiry. We excel in so many astonishing ways at the manipulation of the material order—medicines and weapons, mass communication and mass murder, digital creativity and ecological ruination, scientific exploration and the fabrication of ever more elaborate forms of imbecile distraction—and yet in the realms of "spiritual" achievement—the arts, philosophy, contemplative practices—ours is an unprecedentedly impoverished age. (What, after all, is civilization except a fruitful dialectic between material economy and spiritual exorbitance, physical limitation and metaphysical aspiration?) We have progressed so far that we have succeeded in tearing the atom apart; but to reach that point we may also have had to regress in our moral vision of the physical world to a level barely above the insentient. The mechanical picture of reality, which is the metaphysical frame within which we pursue our conquest of nature, is one that forecloses, arbitrarily and peremptorily, a great number of questions that a truly rational culture should leave open. And that, after all, is the basic pathology of fundamentalism. For all we know, the tribal shaman who seeks visions of the Dreamtime or of the realm of the Six Grandfathers is, in certain crucial respects, immeasurably more sophisticated than the credulous modern Westerner who imagines that technology is wisdom, or

that a compendium of physical facts is the equivalent of a key to reality in its every dimension.

In any event, even if one's concept of rationality or of what constitutes a science is too constricted to recognize the contemplative path for what it is, the essential point remains: no matter what one's private beliefs may be, any attempt to confirm or disprove the reality of God can be meaningfully undertaken only in a way appropriate to what God is purported to be. If one imagines that God is some discrete object visible to physics or some finite aspect of nature, rather than the transcendent actuality of all things and all knowing, the logically inevitable Absolute upon which the contingent depends, then one simply has misunderstood what the content of the concept of God truly is, and has nothing to contribute to the debate. It is unlikely, however, that such a person really cares to know what the true content of the concept is, or on what rational and experiential bases the concept rests. In my experience, those who make the most theatrical display of demanding "proof" of God are also those least willing to undertake the specific kinds of mental and spiritual discipline that all the great religious traditions say are required to find God. If one is left unsatisfied by the logical arguments for belief in God, and instead insists upon some "experimental" or "empirical" demonstration, then one ought to be willing to attempt the sort of investigations necessary to achieve any sort of real certainty regarding a reality that is nothing less than the infinite coincidence of absolute being, consciousness, and bliss. In short, one must pray: not fitfully, not simply in the manner of a suppliant seeking aid or of a penitent seeking absolution but also according to the disciplines of infused contemplation, with

real constancy of will and a patient openness to grace, suffering states of both dereliction and ecstasy with the equanimity of faith, hoping but not presuming, so as to find whether the spiritual journey, when followed in earnest, can disclose its own truthfulness and conduct one into communion with a dimension of reality beyond the ontological indigence of the physical. No one is obliged to make such an effort; but, unless one does, any demands one might make for evidence of the reality of God can safely be dismissed as disingenuous, and any arguments against belief in God that one might have the temerity to make to others can safely be ignored as vacuous.

VI

At the beginning of this book, I suggested that atheism may really be only a failure to see something very obvious; and that is more or less where I wish to end as well. It has also, however, been a persistent theme in these pages that ours is a culture largely formed by an ideological unwillingness to see what is there to be seen. The reason the very concept of God has become at once so impoverished, so thoroughly mythical, and ultimately so incredible for so many modern persons is not because of all the interesting things we have learned over the past few centuries, but because of all the vital things we have forgotten. Above all, somehow, we have as a culture forgotten being: the self-evident mystery of existence that only deep confusion could cause one to mistake for the sort of mystery that admits of a physical or natural or material solution. Perhaps that is attributable not only to how we have been taught

to think, but how we have been taught to live. Late modernity is, after all, a remarkably shrill and glaring reality, a dazzling chaos of the beguilingly trivial and terrifyingly atrocious, a world of ubiquitous mass media and constant interruption, a ceaseless storm of artificial sensations and appetites, an interminable spectacle whose only unifying theme is the imperative to acquire and spend. It is scarcely surprising, in such a world, amid so many distractions, and so many distractions from distraction, that we should have little time to reflect upon the mystery that manifests itself not as a thing among other things, but as the silent event of being itself. Human beings have never before lived lives so remote from nature, or been more insensible to the enigma it embodies. For late modern peoples, God has become ever more a myth, but so in a sense has the world; and there probably is no way of living in real communion with one but not the other.

The greatest metaphysical allegory of Western tradition, to which all our philosophies explicitly or implicitly respond, is Plato's allegory of the cave in *The Republic,* which tells us that the world most of us inhabit is really only an illusion, and that the true world lies beyond what our ordinary vision can perceive. We are, so the story goes, like captives bound in the darkness of a cave, forced to face a wall where flickering shadows are cast by a large fire and by a variety of solid objects behind us and hidden from our view. Knowing no other reality, we mistake those shadows—as well as occasional echoes from movements at our backs—for the only reality there is. Even if we were released from our chains and forced to turn our eyes to the realities hitherto concealed from us, our immediate response would be to turn back again from the dazzling light of the flames, and continue to gaze toward the shadows,

as the only realities we can easily understand. And if we were to be forcibly dragged out of the darkness into the full light of day beyond the cave's mouth, we would angrily resist, and then would be struck blind by the radiance of the sunlit world. In time, though, our vision would adjust, and we would become able to see the things of the outer world clearly, and would ultimately be able to look upward to the sun itself, which we would now recognize as the source and steward of nature's order, and the ultimate source of all vision. And if we were then to return to the obscurity of the cave, those who still reside in the darkness might well regard us as deluded fools and lunatics for trying to convince them that they have mistaken shifting shadows for the fullness of reality. It is a powerful story, and one that no truly reasonable person can cursorily dismiss as only a pretty fable. I happen to believe it contains a profound truth that one can appreciate even if one cannot easily accept Plato's metaphysical picture of a transcendent reality beyond the immanent: one can grant, that is, that there is at least a kind of hierarchy of understanding, and that the mere possession of information is not yet knowledge, and that knowledge is not yet wisdom, and that therefore whatever one thinks one understands might in fact be only the shadow of some greater truth.

The image of the ascent to that truth, however, should not obscure the reality (which Plato acknowledges in many other places) that knowledge of the transcendent is not something gained simply by a flight from the realm of the senses. It begins in one's ordinary experiences of the world. What provokes us to seek the highest truth—what wakens in us that eros for the divine of which mystics speak—is the immediacy with which the transcendent shows itself within the immanent. Our wonder at the mystery of being,

however fleeting and elusive it often proves, is a partial encounter with a divine reality. As I said above, wisdom is the recovery of wisdom at the end of experience. It may be the Wordsworthian Romantic in me, but I do believe that all of us, as persons and as cultures, enjoy an initial state of innocent responsiveness to the mystery of being, a spiritual dawn unburdened by presuppositions and interests, when we are aware of a truth we can express (if at all) only by way of a few imaginative gestures—stories or myths or simply guileless cries of fear and delight. We stand amazed before the gratuity of being and the luminosity of consciousness and the transcendental splendor that seems to shine in and through all things, before indurated habits of thought and will can distance us from the radiant simplicity of that experience. We see the mystery, are addressed by it, given a vocation to raise our thoughts beyond the apparent world to the source of its possibility. In time, though, we begin to seek power over reality and so become less willing to submit our minds to its power over us. Curiosity withers, ambition flourishes. We turn from the mystery of being to the availability of things, from the mystery of consciousness to the accessible objects of cognition, from the mystery of bliss to the imperatives of appetite and self-interest. We gain what we can take by relinquishing what we can only receive as a gift, and obtain power by forgetting that dimension of reality we cannot dominate but can approach only when we surrender ourselves to it. And late Western culture may well be the social order that has ventured furthest away from being in its quest to master beings.

The path to true wisdom, then, is a path of return, by which we might find our way back to the knowledge of God in our first apprehension of the inseparable mysteries of being, consciousness,

and bliss. Our return to that primordial astonishment, moreover, must be one in which we bring along all we learned in departing from it, including the conceptual language needed to translate wonder into knowledge. We shall then be able clearly to see how the contingency of finite existence directs our thoughts toward an unconditional and absolute reality, and how the intentional unity and rationality of the mind opens up to an ultimate unity of intelligibility and intelligence in all things, and how the ecstatic movement of the mind and will toward transcendental perfections is a natural awareness of an ideal dimension that comprehends and suffuses the whole of existence. More simply, we shall arrive at a way of seeing that sees God in all things, a joy that encounters God in the encounter with all reality; we shall find that all of reality is already embraced in the supernatural, that God is present in everything because everything abides in God, and that God is known in all experience because it is the knowledge of God that makes all other experience possible. That, at least, is the end we should seek. For the most part, though, we pass our lives amid shadows and light, illusions and revelations, uncertain of what to believe or where to turn our gaze. Those who have entirely lost the ability to see the transcendent reality that shows itself in all things, and who refuse to seek it out or even to believe the search a meaningful one, have confined themselves for now within an illusory world, and wander in a labyrinth of dreams. Those others, however, who are still able to see the truth that shines in and through and beyond the world of ordinary experience, and who know that nature is in its every aspect the gift of the supernatural, and who understand that God is that absolute reality in whom, in every moment, they live and move and have their being—they are awake.