Figure 1. Icon of Christ Pantocrator, Constantinople, mid-6th century, Encaustic on Wood, Mt. Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine.
In *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), John Paul II remarks on a fundamental contradiction in modern anthropology: on the one hand, the dominant tradition of Western, liberal-secular thought construes human freedom as a story of progress whereby the modern individual is gradually unshackled from both external norms and internal constraints (i.e., virtues) that, prior to the Enlightenment, had substantially restricted religious, political, economic, artistic, and sexual self-expression. On this account, freedom is construed as unfettered self-realization, less a rational appetite (as Aquinas defines the “will”) than an unconditional “right” for which there no longer appear to exist any corresponding obligations. At the same time, various naturalistic and in tendency reductionist explanatory schemes associated with today’s “hard” sciences attempt to trace the uniquely varied, fluid, and interactive manifestations of consciousness to their measurable, neural underpinnings. Indeed, by their very tendency (if not intent), such reductionist accounts end up conflating the *explanandum* (i.e., consciousness) with its somatic, neural and biochemical foundations. Hence, John Paul writes, “side by side with its exaltation of freedom, yet oddly in contrast with it, modern culture radically questions the existence of this freedom” (*VS*, 33.1). As a result, it
often appears “as if a dialectic, if not an absolute conflict, between freedom and nature were characteristic of the structure of human history” (VS, 46.1). Now, whether the efficient causes shaping consciousness are located in our environment (as behaviorism posits) or in our biochemical constitution (as neurobiological accounts would have) does not substantially alter the conclusions to which their reductionist methods point. For in either case, consciousness is not so much explained as it is explained away, seemingly unmasked as a chimera, a mere epiphenomenon of causal forces the impact of which science may capture in quantitative terms and ex post facto, to be sure, yet which individual consciousness can never grasp, let alone transcend, in actual experience.

Let us provisionally accept John Paul’s characterization of modernity’s strictly immanent explanatory framework as having, however inadvertently, saddled us with an “absolute conflict between freedom and nature.” We appear to be confronted with a particularly virulent instance of the old antinomy between freedom and necessity, between a claim to total self-realization unconstrained by any norms and obligations, and a wholly deterministic account of nature asserting explanatory authority over all phenomena, including that of human consciousness. Such a conflict, I submit, cannot be solved within a purely immanent explanatory frame, because the antinomy in question is itself a result of our having, over the course of centuries, embraced this matrix to the point that it now categorically defines what shall count as legitimate knowledge.

Knowledge, on this view, is exclusively construed as a product, not a gift. It has been reduced to impersonal, quantifiable information, valued either as a means for obtaining further information, for its applicability in various technological contexts, or for generating revenue as a patented commodity. While this understanding of knowledge as the fruit of what Augustine calls curiositas is surely here to stay, having utterly transformed our world for several centuries by now, it is also, at the very least, alarmingly incomplete. Thus, quantitative information about the biochemical and neurological operations subtending what
we call consciousness surely is not the same as actually being conscious
and, thus, experiencing the astounding fluidity and complexity of its
manifestations: for example, finding oneself in the presence of (and
duly attending to) another being, say, the face of a stranger or someone
close and dear; being transfixed by a bird that happens to soar above;
or the myriad qualities that we associate with remembering, feeling
anxiety, experiencing sadness, grief, creative passion, love, hope, and
many other human acts and experiences. Add to these the second-
level awareness whereby our primary intentionality is superseded by
an awareness that, just now, I am experiencing one of these states in
totally distinctive ways, and we begin to see that being conscious en-
compasses far more than the basic calculative awareness needed for
some interested activity to be brought to completion.

This takes us to the paradox that conceiving freedom as merely
the absence of all constraint, as total autonomy, ends up denuding
the human person of all contact with Being and, ultimately, reduces
consciousness itself to a mere figment of some bygone, humanist
worldview. Exemplary in this regard is Nietzsche’s dismissal of the
“‘un-free will’ [as] a mythology; in real life it is only a matter of
strong and weak wills.” Here, volition and freedom are construed as
interchangeable, with freedom reduced to the projection of sheer
“force” onto the visible world. Like some steroid-addled version
of Ockham’s nominalist God, Nietzsche’s individual measures its
freedom as the overcoming of all internal constraints—such as the
virtues of prudence, temperance, humility—and all external obli-
gations, such as providing others with a rational and intelligible ac-
count of how it makes use of its freedom. Wholly bereft of reflection
and self-awareness, this seemingly “free” individual has, in fact, been
reduced to a bundle of atavistic impulses. Anticipating the conclu-
sions of modern, scientific reductionism, Nietzsche thus dispenses
with the language of self-examination, discernment, judgment, and
responsible choice and, instead, invests the strong personality with
a mere “instinct for freedom.” As it turns out, his strident existen-
tialist construal of freedom as a quasi-instinctual, unfettered, and
unaccountable doing ends up mirroring the so-called “explanations” of consciousness offered up by modern scientific reductionism.

Which takes me to my main contention today: namely, that human freedom remains unintelligible unless, in laying claim to it, we also acknowledge a dimension of Being wholly transcendent to us, an eternal *logos*. For all human inquiry into specific phenomena is premised on this a priori intelligibility of the world. Even to embark on a quest for understanding natural phenomena of any variety is to already suppose that intelligible meaning can be uncovered within what at first may seem an inchoate flux of appearances. What justifies that presupposition is that we intuitively “apprehend” (what Husserl calls *Auffassung*) their intrinsic structure or “inscape” (as G. M. Hopkins calls it). Already at the most elemental level of experiencing phenomena, that is, we sense the world of appearances as intricately structured and hence as potentially revealing its essential “order” (*kosmos*), provided we engage phenomena with due patience and without preexisting designs. Before nature can be subjected to focused and searching “observation” there has to be “contemplation,” that is, a mode of seeing wherein we respond to the phenomenon as the call of a distinctly structured appearance eliciting our attentive yet undesigning response. To contemplate is to hear that call, and thus to receive the phenomenon as a gift, not least because for the duration of our inhabiting a genuinely contemplative stance we are freed from the thralldom of selfhood, desire, and interest.

Well before the advent of Christianity, contemplation (*theoria*) was understood to be the apex of human flourishing. It is so for Plato (e.g., *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*) and Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 10). Yet it is its Neoplatonist inflection—in the writings of Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus—that allowed Christian writers to recognize contemplation not so much as a philosophical concept but to embrace it as a spiritual, quasi-liturgical practice. Thus, for Plotinus the subject of contemplation is ordered toward self-transcendence, toward a state of sheer receptivity and humility. Altogether central to the ethical formation of
the human being, contemplation for Plotinus is preeminently realized in our encounter with beauty. In the beauty of visible, natural forms, “the greatest, the ultimate contest . . . is set before our souls; all our toil and trouble is for this, not to be left without a share in the best of visions. The man who attains this is blessed in seeing that ‘blessed sight,’ and he who fails to attain it has failed utterly” (1.6.7). Hence, Plotinus is careful to distinguish between strictly hedonistic gazing and genuinely contemplative seeing. Where the act of seeing fully coincides with the ethos by which it ought to be governed, what transpires is the “contemplation of the world of Forms” wherein we may experience “the pure fact” of form in its full, incontrovertible givenness. Whereas perceptual consciousness remains forever “split into two, and occupied by calculations and projects, believes that nothing can be found until it has been searched for,” contemplation opens up a domain of experience free of any such divisions.

Before moving on to the two principal examples of freedom realized in contemplative vision, it bears recalling that by nature contemplation is twofold, involving “on the one hand, a total absorption in the perception of being as noêma, so fully surrendered to what it beholds that the beholder forgets himself in what is beheld.” Hence, echoing Nicholas of Cusa, Balthasar also points out that the ultimate telos of contemplative vision is “for the seer to become the seen.” Far from an incidental type of practice, then, contemplation is defined above all by the way it releases the human being from the thralldom of desire, dominion, and the bondage of subjectivity. Ordered toward a comprehensive, revealed wisdom rather than specialized knowledge, contemplation enables the finite soul to understand itself as a medium for “nature . . . at rest in contemplation of the vision of itself” (3.8.4). Or, as Nicholas of Cusa puts it a millennium later, in contemplation “seeing and being-seen coincide (videre et videri coincidunt).” His famous remark reflects the sudden resurgence of Platonist motifs in late-Scholastic and mystical theology, in particular Plotinus’s central claim that “contemplation and vision [to theorêma] have no limits” (3.8.5) but by their very nature exceed the scope
of intellect and discourse. Not by accident, Plotinian contemplation verges on a condition of total silence.

The first of my two examples, then, is taken from Nicholas of Cusa’s 1453 treatise on mystical theology, *De Visione Dei*. What is arguably his most popular work opens with Nicholas instructing his addressees, the monks at Tegernsee who had asked him for clarification on the nature of mystical vision, on how to look at a Christ icon that, wrought to his specifications, had been included along with the manuscript of his new book. Referring to several examples of the icon—all of them lost today—Nicholas provides a rather accurate description of it. The icon shows a face, almost certainly meant to be Christ’s, that will lock onto the beholder’s gaze regardless of the latter’s spatial location. The formal composition somewhat recalls that of the formal presentation of the Christ icon already found on Byzantine coins manufactured under Justinian in A.D. 691–92, which in turn bear a close resemblance to the famous, mid-sixth-century “Pantocrator” icon at St. Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai (Figure 1). More particularly, Nicholas’s reference to the “Veronica in my chapel at Coblenz,” close to his native Bernkastel, taps into the popular legend of Christ’s face imprinted on the cloth handed to him by Veronica at the Sixth Station of the Cross, a legend that took hold in Western Christianity mainly in the twelfth century as part of a surging popular fascination with Christ’s Passion. Corresponding to the Eastern Church’s much older, legendary Edessa Mandylion—also lost but “preserved” in a number of alleged replicas (Figure 2)—the *vera icon*’s authority derives from the notion, accepted as fact, that the image in question was “not wrought by human hands” (*acheiropoieton*). Capitalizing on the anagrammatic relation of this unique image (*vera icon*) and its human recipient (*Veronica*), Nicholas emphasizes that the contemplative gaze here does not encounter an artificial sign but an unmediated presence, no product but a gift (*donum*), Christ handing over his *imago* much like he passed the bread and the chalice at the Last Supper on the preceding night.

Right away, Nicholas makes clear that the *imago dei* is not a painting
but a presence, not a portrait but a face, not a commentary-dependent object but a summons to the beholder to detach himself from his singular, “contracted” viewpoint. Nicholas here echoes arguments, advanced by Nikephoros and Theodore the Studite in the early ninth century, that, far from “circumscribing” [Christ’s] divine nature,” the icon depicts it as the face of Jesus, “the prosōpon, the person of the Word. In the icon, we see neither a divine nor a human nature, but rather the face of the person of Jesus who is God and man.”

It is this focus on the face and, thus, on Christ’s presence as a person, that accounts for the depth and force of Nicholas’s subsequent argument. For the face is not being experienced as merely “portrayed” but, always, as looking at the beholder. We have reason, then, to construe the title of Nicholas’s work mainly as a genitivus subjectivus: “For the central focus is God’s vision of us, not ours of God.”

Far from a naturalistic and unilateral dominion over the empirically visible, seeing here presupposes being-seen by God, whose eternal, absolute gaze is embodied by the icon; and that gaze is always already upon the beholder before he can make the icon the focus of “contracted” sight. “Being-seen” (videri) means to be present to the infinity that is the face of the wholly transcendent other; it is to be created by God’s “absolute vision” (visio absoluta), which the icon seeks to mediate for the finite, human viewer.
For the benefit of the Tegernsee brethren, Nicholas thus “encloses a panel [tabellam] that I was able to acquire. It contains the figure of an omnivoyant [individual]; and I call it the ‘icon of God’ [figuram cuncta videntis tenentem, quam eiconam dei appello]” (VD, 2). As he continues,

Hang this icon somewhere, e.g., on the north wall; and you brothers stand around it, at a short distance from it, and observe it. Regardless of the place from which each of you looks at it, each will have the impression that he alone is being looked at by it. To the brother who is situated in the east, it will seem that the face is looking toward the east; to the brother in the south, that the face is looking south. . . . First of all, then, marvel at how it is possible that [the face] behold each and every one of you at once. For the imagination of the brother who is standing in the east does not at all apprehend the icon’s gaze that is being directed toward a different region, viz., toward the west or the south. (VD, 3)

Finding the “icon’s gaze moved unmovingly” as he changes his position, a monk may eventually “ask the approaching brother whether the icon’s gaze moves continually with him” and, being told that the icon’s gaze moves both with him and in the opposite manner, “he will believe his fellow-monk.” The icon, then, has the paradoxical effect of giving rise to a spiritual community precisely by instilling in each of its members a sense of being the sole and constant focus of its gaze, “as if [the icon] saw only this person and nothing else.”\textsuperscript{1}\textsuperscript{11} Not only does the icon’s omnivoyant gaze metaphorically instantiate God’s absolute vision, but it also enjoins each individual viewer to recognize the necessarily partial and incomplete deliverances of his gaze: “It shows me that I am not in control of the space of my visual perceptions. As soon as I listen to someone who is looking at a shared focus of attention from a different viewpoint I start to appreciate that something is invisible to me.”\textsuperscript{1}\textsuperscript{12}

Nicholas’s instructions to the monks frame the icon within the relatively new genre of the \textit{imago pietatis}, that is, as a visual presence aimed at inducing in the beholder a state of focused and sustained
spiritual self-examination. Alex Stock thus regards the “devotional image” (*Andachtsbild*) as mediating between the didactic function of earlier religious imagery, which depicts scenes from Biblical narrative, and the hieratic images of Christ and the saints.”

Perhaps the version closest to the panel that Nicholas enclosed with his manuscript is a copy of a Christ icon painted by van Eyck around 1438 (Figure 3). Consistent with the core axioms of Byzantine image theory, the image

**Figure 3.** *Head of Christ, copy after a lost painting from 1438*, Jan van Eyck (1390–1441). Photo credit: bpk Bildagentur, Art Resource, New York.
in question certainly is not to be understood as a portrait. It does not “represent” Christ but asks the beholder to meet him, to achieve a mental and spiritual vision of Christ, by responding to the gaze of the icon. Thus, there are no narrative elements, no background scenery, no symbolic objects of the kind beginning to invade early-fifteenth-century religious and portrait painting. Instead, the icon constitutes “an absolute presence and a generality of presence, outside any context . . . a timeless and unlocated face.”

Contrary to the mnemonic and affective function of much fifteenth-century religious painting, the icon’s function is strictly “experimental” (experimentaliter). Nicholas’s exegesis is not focused on the image per se but on the gaze it instills, a gaze whose spiritual meaning will only be fulfilled if and when it detaches itself from what is plainly visible. For the true locus of visio is a function of how rather than what, that is, concerns not the “object” seen but the spiritual self-awareness that the gaze induces in the beholder. As Nicholas points out, “It is not the essence of sight that sight beholds one object more than another.” Rather, “sight’s perfection [perfectionis visus]” inheres precisely in its capacity to “behold each and everything at once.” This, then, is “absolute sight . . . [which] excels all the acuity, swiftness, and power” of actual sight. Nicholas also calls it “abstract sight [visum abstractum]” because it has been “mentally . . . freed from all eyes and organs [quem mente absolvi ab omnibus oculis et organis]” (VD, 1, 6).

The icon, then, is the heuristic device by means of which Nicholas proposes to illustrate for his readers this “absolute” or “abstract” sight, and by extension to clarify his understanding of mystical theology as a form of spiritual sight. No longer tethered to a particular object or referent but, instead, reflexively doubling back on itself, such mental vision ultimately points toward the total suspension of visibility, visuality, and any residually naturalist outlook on existence. Instead, by interacting with the icon or, rather, with the gaze that the icon models for them, the Tegernsee brethren will be “led . . . into most sacred darkness [in sacratissimam obscuritatem manuducere]” (VD, 1–2). Such leading-by-the-hand (manuducere), a
catechesis in how properly to see, positions De Visione Dei on the border between practical and speculative theology. Nicholas’s treatise, that is, “seems to join a western and Benedictine spirituality of lectio to a Byzantine spirituality of gazing. Cusanus’s icon becomes text; his text and the reader become icons.” Yet unlike the phenomenology of image-consciousness developed by Byzantine iconodules such as John of Damascus, Theodore the Studite, or Photius, Nicholas does not construe the community forged by the icon and its beholders in affective terms, that is, as a matter of compassion. Rather, his objective is mainly intellectual in kind, such that “seeing attests to a foundational visibility that is fulfilled by sight [eine prinzipielle Sichtbarkeit, die des Sehens bedarf]. Seeing, then, comes alive in a sensuously differentiating reflection [sinnlich-differenzierende Reflexion].”

Perhaps no poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins instantiates more forcefully the apprehension of a natural phenomenon as an acheiropoieton, and hence as a visible figura (typos) of the incarnate logos, than “The Windhover.” Considered by Hopkins to be “the best thing I ever wrote” (HCW, 1: 362) and among the most widely anthologized poems in the English language, the sonnet’s power stems above all from the way that its highly particularized and ecstatic visuality, as well as its luxuriant soundscape, are presented as essential to a knowledge of Christ, albeit not identical with him. The kestrel is first and foremost a contingent natural being. Yet, given its spatio-temporal determinacy as this bird seen at St. Beuno’s on June 30, 1877, and executing distinctive patterns of flight and motion, it also has an essential quality. It is this fusion of the contingent and the essential that allows the kestrel to capture Hopkins’s attention as an acheiropoieton that figures for the beholder the source in which all being originated and “the terminus of [God’s] providence” (CM, 124) to which it seeks to return. The motional trope of “hovering” thus aptly situates this bird and this beholder in a communion of sorts, at once inhabiting a physical place and a spiritual state, hovering between heaven and earth:
“The Windhover”
(to Christ our Lord)

I caught this morning morning’s minion, kingdom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level undernéath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimping wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!
Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
No wónder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gáll themsélves, and gásh gólđ-vermílion.18

What dominates is the sense of a beginning, a dawn revelation (with “morning” conspicuously repeated in the opening line) that features the kestrel’s temporal being “in his ecstasy” yielding to the “king-/dom” for which the bird itself is the figure. Thus, “daylight’s dauphin” functions typologically by mediating between the kestrel’s natural being and the figure of Christ to whom the sonnet, uniquely in this regard among Hopkins’s poems, is dedicated. The Windhover’s being is consumed by this mediation. It does not belong to the order of objects but, instead, is pure “act” and energéia, a distinctive pattern of movements fused into a single gestalt by the poem’s end-rhymed “riding,” “striding,” and “gliding.” Movement is one of the ways in which, as Maximus had argued, an essence discloses itself insofar as the movement in question exhibits a distinctive pattern: “All things move in either a linear, circular, or spiral manner. All motion, in other words, unfolds in simple and composite patterns.”19 At once effortless and teeming with energy, utterly controlled and free,
the kestrel’s dynamic manifestation transfixes the beholder with its very “achieve” and aura of a supernatural, “brute beauty.” Ultimately, the kestrel’s sheer “mastery of the thing”—that is, most fully being what it was created to be—embodies Christ’s perfection. Compared with the splendor of the kestrel’s morning daylight, Christ’s is a fire “a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous.”

“Hiersein ist herrlich! [Being here is glorious]” Rilke will write in his seventh Duino elegy. With far greater metaphysical assurance, Hopkins’s sonnet conveys such “splendor,” albeit not in the form of a proposition asserted but as the event of sheer being, here witnessed in all its “brute beauty and valour and act.” Hence, the poet’s “heart in hiding” seeks not simply to participate in but to merge with the Christ icon visibly figured by the kestrel in flight—a merging given audible expression by the internal rhyme of the octet’s final line (“stirred for a bird”). To see and to know is also to love, to “stir for” that which is seen. As Maximus puts it, “from God come both our general power of motion (for He is our beginning), and the particular way that we move toward Him (for he is our end).” To see is to be summoned by that which gives itself to be seen, to “be moved intellectually . . . [and to] become a knowing intellect. But if it knows, it surely loves that which it knows; and if it loves, it certainly suffers an ecstasy toward it as an object of love.” Such a movement, like that of the bird as “off forth on swing,” will intensify and “greatly accelerate its motion” (A, 7: 1073 C). The kestrel’s ecstasy transfers to the beholder who is moved to see, in and by means of the bird, what nevertheless remains beyond all vision and, as Maximus had put it, will have “sanctified his sense with uncontaminated images.”

Gently correcting Origen’s premise of material creation as inherently lapsed, Maximus posits that “we are able conjecturally to derive an image—not of that participation in goodness which existed long ago and fell to corruption—but that of which the worthy shall partake in the age to come; and I say an ‘image’ because what we hope for is beyond all images, surpassing vision and hearing and understanding, according to Scripture.”

Characteristic of many of Hopkins’s nature sonnets, “The
Windhover” mobilizes the formal division of the Petrarchan sonnet into octet and sestet so as to move from a particular image to what transcends the visible realm altogether. In this case, the pivot is located in the enigmatic “buckle” of line 10. It marks the turning point where the visible is effectively supplanted by the knowledge that it can only ever be figura (typos) for, but never essentially coincide with, that toward which it points. A great deal of philological detective work has been lavished on the meaning of “Buckle” at the beginning of line 10. Indeed, the allusions and associations variously imputed to the word may be seen to enrich what is here considered as the word’s dual meaning: 1) a turn, loop, or bell-curve-like swerve indicating that an apex has been reached and is now followed by a downward motion; and 2) buckle as the link between two distinct, though not opposed domains—in this instance those of finite appearance and transcendent truth, respectively.

At the same time, Hopkins’s unusual choice of capitalizing the conjunction (“Buckle! AND . . .”) emphasizes that these two domains of being are distinct yet coordinated, dissimilar but not unrelated. Thus, the image of the kestrel points to—but nowise merges with—the transcendent and ineffable God, “the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous.” The relationship between “inscaped” natural being and “Christ our Lord,” the image and the source of all being, respectively, is thus one of analogy. We are not presented with an Origenist scenario in which the visible competes with (or, rather, against) the invisible for the same epistemological space. Nor, for that matter, does Hopkins’s sonnet construe (in Dionysian fashion) the visible image as some strictly provisional scaffolding, to be superseded by its ineffable divine referent. Instead, as the poem’s dedication makes clear, the kestrel’s Christological dimension is honored, precisely, by keeping both dimensions in productive tension and balance. In so doing, the poem avoids an outright collapsing of immanence into transcendence, or vice versa, but sees visible being in tensioned relation to its transcendent source. As Hopkins will later put it in his commentary on Ignatius, “His presence is a
reality, though invisible” and “Though God gives us His Word and Image, the Word and Image has with it the divine substance” (SDW, 194).

Linking the two realms, the “buckle” correlates visible, “inscaped” being with the ineffable, triune God. Underwriting this fusion of octet and sestet into a coherent poetic and theological statement is the metaphysical principle of analogia. As Maximus writes, the God who has “wisely inscribed [the marvelous physical phenomena that we see] and is ineffably inscribed within them, is rendered legible when He is read by us, communicating to us solely the concept that he exists, and not what He is … allowing Himself to be seen by analogy through visible things as their Creator (analogos heauton dia ton horaton).”

Depending on whether this carefully wrought model of the analogia entis is kept in view or not, the intentionality underlying our engagement of visible being will typically be one of two kinds: either an idolatrous gaze will reify a given phenomenon into an anthropomorphic perception, which in turn desire will seek to appropriate as an object; or, alternatively, an attentive and undesigning gaze apprehends the phenomenon as “image” (eikon), thereby mediating, albeit only by analogy, the Logos that is at once its source and its end. On this latter understanding, the icon instantiates what Maximus already outlines as the analogy of being: “All things are related to Him without being confused with Him, who is the essential and personally distinct Logos of God the Father” (A, 7: 1077C). Maximus affirms (with Dionysius) that created or “circumscribed” beings or logoi cannot be ontologically fungible with Divine Being or Logos. Whereas Duns Scotus will later equivocate on this crucial point, Maximus categorically affirms that “it is not possible for the infinite and the finite to exist simultaneously on the same level of being” (A, 7: 1081B). Yet going beyond Dionysius’s apophaticism, Maximus also holds that Logos and logoi are analogically related and that “the Word . . . is concealed within beings” (A, 6: 1068B). For that reason, created being never merely is but, in its act-like, dynamic manifestation, solicits the human beholder’s participation in what Hopkins calls “bidding.” As an inscaped appearance whose intrinsic coherence
and formal determinacy not only betokens existence but constitutes a palpable presence, a natural being such as Hopkins’s kestrel is simultaneously the *imago* of its transcendent source, which it mediates for the beholder. Maximus’s warrant for this additional stipulation has to do with the fact that, as Erich Przywara was to put it, “creaturely potentiality does not, of itself, place limits on God, but rather receives its limits from God.”

Though he does not cast the matter in terms of *analogia*, Hopkins nevertheless holds the same view. Thus, while not denying “that there is a universal really, and not only logically,” he points out that ultimately both “the species and individual in the brutes,” though distinct from one another, must neither be confused with nor dissociated from the Logos whom they manifest. Where Maximus distinguishes sharply between one (divine) Logos or Word and multiple *logoi*, Hopkins also affirms with regard to “the form of the whole species [that] these universals are finite only. . . . God is so deeply present to everything, that it would be impossible for him but for his infinity not to be identified with them.” Conversely, “were it not for God’s infinity he could not be so intimately present to things” (*SDW*, 128; italics mine). It is God’s unconditional, intimate presence to and nonidentity with created things that the poem’s closing tercet captures so brilliantly:

No wónder of it: shéér plód makes plough down síllion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gáll themsélves, and gásh góld-vermílion.

The shift from the octet’s motional tropes to brilliant colors (“blue-bleak embers / gásh góld-vermílion) brings home the *analogia* framework in uniquely vivid and particular ways. Rapturously addressed (“*O my chevalier!*”), Christ’s wound, the “gash,” shifts the visual focus to his blood. The blood’s warm crimson foreshadows the earthly fecundity of plowed fields, reinforced by the end-rhyme of “síllion” and “vermílion.” The hard labor and timeless rhythms of breaking the dark soil into symmetrical furrows (“sillions”) polishes
the steel plow, which thus reflects the radiance (“Shine”) of God who, in Przywara’s searching formulation is both “in-and-beyond” (in-und-über) finite, material being. Inasmuch as “God infinitely transcends all things which participate or are participated,” created beings can only be a figure or image of God by having formally inscribed within them what the Fourth Lateran Council had stipulated as the “greater dissimilarity” that tempers the analogical relation between finite and transcendent being. Or, as Maximus puts it, “all visible things need a cross, that is, a capacity which holds back the participation in what is active in them according to sense” (MSW, 137; 140). For Maximus, this caveat extends not only to visible things but also to the spoken and written word, including Scripture, which is consummated not in the modality of literal reference but in that of thought: “We must necessarily take thought for the ‘body’ of Holy Scripture, which is far superior to its ‘garments’” (A, 10: 1132B).

Yet the poetic balancing act of the analogia principle—which consists in productively configuring the domain of visible appearances to the reality of the transcendent, triune God—proved impossible to sustain, even for a poet as gifted and intellectually aware of his challenges as Hopkins. In the event, in Hopkins’s late work, the so-called “dark” sonnets written during his final, miserable years (1884–1889) in Dublin, the contemplation of visible phenomena is no longer invested with the same revelatory powers as the poems written a decade earlier. Written in an alien, inhospitable, unhealthy, and decaying city, these poems instead conjure a life of isolation and drudgery, spent “Among strangers” and “at a third remove” (HMW, 166)—that is, lived out in terminal estrangement from family, from England, and its familiar patterns of sociability. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to trace further Hopkins’s descent into “the fell of dark,” into “black hours,” and into a despondency that leaves the poet “Pitched past pitch of grief” (HMW, 166–67). Yet there can be no doubt that the darkness of these late sonnets shows him having succumbed to despair only intermittently punctured by hope, and that the night that “will end us” reveals the other side of apophaticism—that of a
God abiding in immeasurable numinous darkness rather than limned by the analogical principle of inscaped forms. Hence, the charismatic call of visible beauty, though still faintly audible at times, is now increasingly experienced as a torment that Hopkins wishes to see violently expunged, such as in an 1885 fragment in which he welcomes the wind and hail that will “May’s beauty massacre . . . Bid joy back, have at the harvest, [and] keep Hope pale” (HMW, 167). Here, the analogia principle that had formerly allowed Hopkins to invest visible phenomena with revelatory power, while also safeguarding against their quasi-pantheist conflation, has decisively collapsed. Perhaps it was inevitable that the luminous plenitude of Hopkins’s nature sonnets and the metaphysical certitude they adumbrate should prove short-lived, yielding but a handful of spectacular poems. Yet what Hopkins achieved during those blissful years at St. Beuno’s seminary in Wales, namely, to fuse visual experience and spiritual contemplation in the medium of sprung rhythm, may have been the last time in modern literature that the lyric word unequivocally achieves an authentic (analogical) relation to transcendence. By contrast, the high-modernist epiphanies of Rilke, Mann, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, perhaps even the late Eliot, prove far more muted and prevaricating, with their proponents for the most part anxious to avoid both the absolute metaphysical affirmations and outright existentialist despair that bookend Hopkins’s mature oeuvre.

Notes


7. The picture, though lost, is described in sufficient detail for us to think of a number of extant artworks. Nicholas mentions Rogier van der Weyden, whose experimentation with an “omnivoyant” gaze is preserved in a textile copy of a painting, *The Justice of Trajan*, thought to have been made in 1450 and to have been located in Brussels, where Nicholas may well have seen it during his tour of the Low Countries in 1451–52; see Alex Stock, “Die Rolle der ‘Icona Dei’ in der Spekulation ‘De Visione Dei,’” *Das Sehen Gottes nach Nikolaus von Kues*, ed. Rudolf Haustb (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1989), 50–68, quote from 52; Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, trans. Deborah L. Schneider (Harvard: Belknap Press, 2011), 221–38.


14. As it happens, it is in the middle of a history painting—*The Justice of Trajan*, documented as late as 1581 but now only extant in a textile copy—that Rogier von der Weyden had inserted himself as a figure locking onto the beholder with an omnivoyant gaze.

15. “In *De Visione Dei* one sees God through and, therefore, beyond image and icon—not merely by means of an icon but by passing through the image and moving from a meditation to a contemplation of the infinite, incomprehensible God beyond all concepts, figures, and imaginings” (Bond, “The ‘Icon,’” 182, 184); see also Werner Beiwerwaltes, who characterizes Cusa’s icon as an “intellectual figure” (*Denkform*), “Visio
Facialis": Sehen ins Angesicht—Zur Koinzidenz des endlichen und unendlichen Blicks bei Cusanus" (Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988), 1: 90—124, quote from 95; and Alex Stock, op. cit., who reads De Visione Dei as a “philosophical prayer” (philosophisches Gebet), 60.

20. Maximus the Confessor, Selected Writings, trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 131; henceforth cited parenthetically as SW.
21. Ambiguum 7: 1076A. Elsewhere, Maximus distances himself more firmly from Origenism’s negative view of visible and sensible matter: “In applying itself to visible things the mind knows them in accordance with nature through the medium of the senses, so that neither is the mind evil, nor is natural knowledge, nor the things, nor the senses, for these are all works of God,” Maximus, SW, 48.
22. Norman H. MacKenzie, A Reader’s Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins (Philadelphia: St. Joseph’s Press, 2008), 72—73, references several interpretations, including the function of “buckle” in the art of falconry; its presence as a D-shaped fetterlock on the heraldic badge of the House of York; and its meaning of an arc of electric light, “dangerous” as well as full of color, described in period handbooks on electricity.
23. Maximus, Difficulties, vols. Ambiguum 10: 1128D; also, in Ad Thalassium 60, Maximus again draws on the concept of analogy as he offers this programmatic statement about spiritual knowledge: “It is impossible for rational knowledge [logos] of God to coexist with the direct experience [peira] of God, or for conceptual knowledge [noesis] of God to coexist with immediate perception [aesthesis] of God. By ‘rational knowledge of God’ I mean the use of the analogy [ten ek ton onton analogian] of created beings in the intellectual contemplation of God; by ‘perception’ I mean the experience through participation, of the supernatural goods” Maximus the Confessor, On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from Maximus the Confessor, trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 2003), 126.
24. As Benedict XVI categorically put it in his Regensburg Address of 2005, “The faith of the Church has always insisted that between God and us . . . there exists a real analogy, in which—as the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 stated—unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness, yet not to the point of abolishing analogy and its language” in James Schall, The Regensburg Lecture (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007), 137—38.
25. Erich Przywara, Analogia Entis: Metaphysics, Original Structure and Universal Rhythm, trans. and ed. John Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans,
Przywara affirms that “no potentiality of the creature . . . is able by its enactment to exhaust this act that is interiorly related to itself” (ibid.).

A formal metaphysics thus must not only stipulate “that the divine absolute as it appears ‘from’ the creaturely can be only ‘beyond (everything creature-ly)’ [Gott über Geschöpf]. On the contrary, this ‘beyond’ is ‘beyond’ in the fullest sense only when the appearing of the divine absolute is not bound in any way intrinsically to this ‘from (the creaturely)’ [von . . . aus dem Geschöpflichen] but instead presides independently over the manner of its own appearing (Przywara, Analogia, 161).