

On Boundedness

(one of two)

Although the most basic aspect of our existence is boundedness, usually we are not conscious of it as such but bump into limitations of one sort or another on a daily basis. We are inherently limited...bounded...no matter how great may be the field of our activity and involvement in society. A simple insight, to be sure, yet at the same time boundedness pervades our very being as in the limited time span we have to live. It's also a topic pretty much on the top of our agenda as we get older or when our options become more restricted. More often than not at this late stage we experience regret for time squandered and choices poorly made.

1. A number of helpful conversations contributed to this article which for the most part centered around Socrates' famous profession of ignorance, for it and awareness of being bound have an intimate connection as hopefully will be demonstrated. A further stimulus is associated with the Gregory of Nyssa Home Page. Some years back I had added a document containing more important references from his works which relate to boundedness. Actually the specific form of Socratic ignorance relates well with Gregory's reflections on the inherent limitations of human existence within the context of Christian spiritual life. Gregory of Nyssa has a loaded word which pertains to boundedness or more specifically interval, diastema. Although a list of relevant texts may be found on that Home Page, I take the liberty to insert them (along references to boundedness) at the end of this essay. In this way some ideas developed here may be viewed in light of Gregory's writings. Anyone acquainted with the Church Fathers in general will know that they, especially those who wrote in Greek, were heavily affected by the Hellenistic culture in which they lived. Of particular interest were the Dialogues of Plato as well as Neo-Platonism.

The context in which these ideas on boundedness have been formulated is the monastic environment, a total way of life quite rare in modern society. Because people are generally unfamiliar with it, some explanation will be offered to flesh out a few of the points made here. Furthermore, the reflections presented are not done in a professional manner. It may be better to think of them more like a report from the field, the fertile field of monastic life. I've found that it isn't easy as at first glance to write about a way of life in which you are inserted; usually a better perspective arises from someone acquainted with it yet one step removed.

A chief feature of monasticism is *stabilitas*, the Latin word for stability which is quite alien to the modern world of mobility, upwards or otherwise. Although the connection between the Latin and English terms is obvious enough, *stabilitas* is richer because it governs a mode of life. More precisely, *stabilitas* embraces a monk's entire existence from the day he enters until the day he dies. Thus we are dealing with a considerable measure of a person's life span, not a period of some five, ten or even more years. *Stabilitas* is at the root of all the other vows a monk makes; it is the most inclusive of them all, the atmosphere in which the monk lives and breathes. Closely associated with *stabilitas* is its practical expression, enclosure. A monk does not exit his abbey except for serious reasons: trips to the doctor, dentist or the like. Even family visits aren't included except in emergencies. *Stabilitas* has wider interpretations than at first glance; monks shouldn't be perceived as "stuck" within the enclosure as behind prison bars. Today we are more connected with the world than in the case of previous generations and require services which entail frequent exits from the monastery. The same applies for these services coming into the monastic enclosure. An interesting point about enclosure is that even visitors instinctively realize that it is that which is most characteristic of a monk. They know it sets him apart, even apart from other modes of religious life. This is a helpful point for monks to keep in mind, for it unites both sides of the enclosure wall, so to speak, in a common awareness. Another

feature of *stabilitas* is that a monk does not change allegiance to another house even though he may help out here and there depending upon needs.

All right, so we have here several insights which seem to dovetail: boundedness as common to human nature (everyone participates in it whether they like it or not) and *stabilitas* and enclosure which is common to monks in particular. What makes the last two more challenging is not so much the mobility of modern culture with which we're all familiar but the extended life span we enjoy today in comparison with generations as recent as the grandparents of many of us. Thus a shorter life span was the norm extending backwards into time immemorial from approximately World War I. That includes about 99.99% of human history. A young man who enters a monastery nowadays can expect to live well beyond earlier generations even though monks were well noted for having outlived their contemporaries. It may be noted in passing that monastic tradition sometimes speaks of "elders" or "seniors." The term does not necessarily imply physical age but persons experienced in this mode of life and who are qualified to transmit it to future generations.

Some fifteen years ago a cloistered nun in France did a study of monks, at least those in Europe as distinct from America and other continents, although her results are applicable to developed countries. She found that many experienced a crisis after being in the monastery roughly ten years; that seemed to be a time when they questioned for the first time, "Is this there all is to it?" Such men (and presumably nuns as well) spent the ten year period getting acclimatized to a new environment after which it closed in on them. In effect it dawned on them they had the prospect of spending the rest of their lives in the same place with the same people. The future stretched out indefinitely with little prospect of advancement or personal growth. Perhaps these young monks viewed their seniors with dismay or even disdain: "Is this what monastic life produces?" Their seniors were raised in a context vastly different from the period after the Second Vatican Council when the world, Church and monastery appeared eternal and unchanging. Now everything is up for grabs and subject to questioning. The seniors cannot be blamed for the current state of affairs. Better, they are to be congratulated for having maintained the tradition of monastic life as best they could.

One of the most central features to Benedictine monasticism—*stabilitas*—was at the heart of this questioning process with some monastics wondering if it required re-evaluation. When you're in the midst of a personal crisis, living under the vow of *stabilitas* with its unique demands can aggravate one's problems because every aspect of monastic life is entwined with the others. Invariably a difficulty with one part of the life will work its way within the broader context of *stabilitas*, of living in one place. Why this is so, nobody really can say. A person has to be in the midst of the monastic life to grasp it; even then monks have a hard time getting a handle on the situation. There is no compartmentalization as in society where you can come home after a tough day at the office and make a distinction between the sanctuary of your house and the place of work. A younger monk can look beyond the cloister walls and observe that none of his contemporaries are living the way he is. They're jetting all over the world...and those who are doing it aren't happy and looking for other ways to spend their lives. Thoughts of greener pastures nevertheless are bound to pass through the head of a newcomer and can be quite unnerving. It would be more precise and in line with that French study to say these thoughts tend to arise after approximately ten years when the novelty wears off.

With this brief overview in mind, it is not difficult to see why the topic of boundedness has special significance in a monastic context. An extreme though parallel case consists of those stories we've all heard about from the Soviet gulag or North Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camps. Courage demonstrated under extreme conditions fascinates us which pales in comparison to our experiences. How does a person confined to a small dungeon manage to keep his or her sanity? We are familiar with their ingenious attempts at creating mental games in order to pass away the time and to stave off thoughts

about their confinement. Perhaps the same mentality applies to people when they come to a monastery although in a mitigated form. “How do these people manage to survive living together in one place all the time?” Not an infrequent question posed by visitors in one form or another. Of course the difference is that monks are doing it voluntarily and prisoners are doing it otherwise.

Another feature of monastic life that strikes even the casual visitor is the constant proclamation of the divine word through liturgical readings. A person will quickly discover an underlying theme despite the wide variety of texts: the distinction between God and our human condition. One is infinite and the other is finite. Both involve an interplay with other rudiments of the spiritual life such as sin, redemption, prayer and contemplation. Trying to figure how all this works is daunting by any standards. It isn't easy to achieve a balance even by folks who've been at the monastic life for many a year. This privilege of being exposed to readings from both the Old and New Testaments, not to mention texts from the Church Fathers and related texts, is exciting for a newcomer fresh from a modern environment where religious training is pretty much absent. It's an educational process where one is picking up the fundamentals of the Christian life. On top of this the novice has the great liturgical cycles of Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter, not to mention numerous feasts and commemorations throughout the year. Still the bottom line comes to an awareness of being bounded, circumscribed. One practical off-shoot is that once a grand liturgical celebration has come to and end—say Christmas—the monk returns to his cell which was exactly the same as before he left it for this celebration.

There comes a time—let's say that particular ten year cut-off point the above-mentioned cloistered French nun is talking about—when the Church's heritage presented by the liturgy becomes dry as dust. You realize nothing more can be said except that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. He died and rose from the dead after which he sent the Holy Spirit to guide us. That's all there is to it. Everything is summarized in the Apostles' Creed, only the message is spread out over a much longer period of time through variously nuanced readings. One monk who has been at this life for close to fifty years noted recently after Vespers, “I must have heard that reading (first chapter of Ephesians) at least a hundred-thousand times.”

+

These remarks bring up a point. In the monastery a person is exposed to the relentless proclamation of Scriptural texts, so much so that as soon as you hear the first words from a given reading, you automatically know what will follow. Even more so when you hear the parables and accounts of Christ's life recorded in the Gospels simply because these texts are much shorter and filled with images easy to recall. It takes around three years of passing through the liturgical cycle to reach this point where familiarity runs the risk of breeding contempt. According to their abilities and preferences, monks back up what they hear on a daily basis with a combination of personal prayer, *lectio divina* and study—i.e., private enterprises—otherwise the whole venture could quickly become meaningless. Thus two currents are at work: what's heard in common and what's done in private. Both feed into each other. Even though this process is constantly at work (invisible to the casual visitor), there remains the inescapable burden of time or duration embodied in the same unyielding schedule. As one priest from Canada who had spent several months as a live-in guest had noted, “I've never been read at so much in all my life!”

When monks and people in general lived to approximately the maximum of forty years, they sensed an urgency at applying the principles of Christian asceticism and mysticism just delineated. Time was relatively short—you could count on it—and they had only around twenty years to incorporate monastic principles. Nobody got up and told people to do it. It was something shared unconsciously by everyone. Nowadays life begins at forty, if I may employ a familiar catch-phrase, when many people

contemplate beginning a second career let alone a second marriage.

If the life span of most people didn't extend much beyond forty, that would put the creation of the entire corpus of spiritual writings and other recorded experiences we have inherited into a unique perspective. These documents were set down by "young" people, the New Testament included. Their application to humanity well beyond that cutoff point of forty was not even contemplated nor could it. We know that anything which pertains to the divinity transcends space and time and thus the limited human life span. Still the fact remains that our common spiritual and philosophical heritage was composed under different circumstances or when people didn't live long. The situation has changed dramatically, for no spiritual material exists which takes into account the fact that people now expect to be active well into their eighties, nineties and perhaps beyond. And this doesn't include the specter of genetic engineering. You can't help but wonder what perspective a writer would take now.

One bright note can be associated with the last paragraph. In more recent years many abbeys of the Benedictine family had begun serious consideration of lay associates or people "in the world" affiliated with monastic life. It may extend to what has hitherto been mostly taboo, temporary vocations, where a person is a monk for a pre-determined period of time. This tradition was in effect in India for centuries which took into account the entire human life span of youth, marriage, raising a family and finally retiring to the forest to live as a hermit.

A person enters the bounded world of a monastery in order to become free or to shake off restrictions which hinder the search for God. Perhaps the most conspicuous example of being restricted is the reality of work, of having to earn a living which entails job security, medical benefits and how this pans out with respect to retirement. People who work look forward to weekends as well as their vacations which is generally two or three weeks a year. Thus their world is divided into two halves: free time (often occupied with a thousand necessities) and actual work which occupies on the average eight hours a day. I may add an hour before and after—commute time—which brings the total duration of work to around ten hours a day, almost half the twenty-four hour cycle.

Monks work for a living as well but their work is part of a larger whole and is divided more evenly. In larger communities work is specialized, doing one thing, while in smaller ones one monk can be saddled with multiple tasks. Regardless, a monk never has to worry about doctor bills, food on the table and clean clothes. This aspect of community life doesn't dawn on a monk until after about twenty years when he considers his contemporaries who, despite prosperous trappings, all along have been struggling to make ends meet. Then there's retirement. A monk can look forward to exceptional care in the infirmary while for most people it's their greatest worry. Even the distinction between work and vacation doesn't exist in the monastery. It may be a bit simplistic, but monks are always on vacation. In other words, they are bounded in ways which strike the casual visitor as restrictive, yet they are free to do things well beyond the reach of ordinary folks, things most people dream about. As one monk recently commented, "Right now I'm doing full time or close to it what most folks would give an arm and a leg to do in their spare time." Usually this centers around books to read (better, to read slowly and thus savor their contents), hobbies and plain old relaxation in the fuller sense of this word.

+

Such is an outline of some aspects of boundedness within the context of monasticism which have special application for us at the threshold of the twenty-first century. To a certain extent awareness of limitations has an air of Ecclesiastes' famous cry, "Vanity of vanity, all is vanity." His exclamation over the fleeting character both of human undertakings and natural phenomena can be taken as a necessary introduction to delineate a particular set of bounds. It would be better to say that these limits are

open to expansion on a non-temporal, non-spacial plane and thus relate to true freedom. If you ask anyone who has been in the monastery past that ten year mark or who has gotten to a point of settling down (hopefully for life), the common denominator boils down to is awareness of the fleeting nature of everything and everyone. It serves to keep a monk going but is only the surface perception which conceals a deeper awareness of his vocation. In fact this deeper awareness is generally not shared among monks, just the surface aspect. Some communities perceive a need to get at this more comprehensive level through further dialogue or dialogue past the initial stages of some fifteen to twenty years ago. Perhaps that period of initial dialogue dealt with the “first half” of monastic life, whereas the deeper one is proper to the “second half.”

When we are in the midst of a difficult situation—let’s say that feeling of being boxed by the four walls of the monastic enclosure—it is difficult to see a solution which more often than not is hidden from our sight and waiting to be revealed. Our immediate dark mood blots out everything else; the same holds true in a bad marriage, unfavorable work conditions, an addiction or anything else. The superficial symptom is a desire to get out of the monastery, to escape the confinement in which we find ourselves. In other words, anywhere but here.

Awareness of the passage of time is related to the concept of boundedness (cf. the article on diastema, appendix, #5). There’s no need to get into the details since we’re all familiar with two extremes: either time drags on indefinitely or we don’t have enough of it. It is a fairly recent phenomenon to conceive time in terms of a commodity, an objective “thing,” which translates into monetary value. The monastic context is very different, being built around a natural rhythm expressed through the Divine Office which gathers the community seven times each day. The twenty-four hour period is divided into “hours” beginning before sunrise and ending just after sunset. In other words, monks get up and go to bed pretty much according to the natural rhythm of day and night. Despite this ancient method of delineating time, monks aren’t immune to complaining that they don’t have enough time or to use the old expression, “interval time.” This phrase is interesting in that intervals were perceived as bits and pieces of time in between the obligations work and presence at the Divine Office. Nowadays the challenge is to handle much larger chunks of interval time since a monk must do it on his own as opposed to visual support by the community or when most monks were engaged in it right before your eyes.

+

Let’s get back to the average monk who “starts” monastic life at forty, taking into consideration that people take longer to mature, another factor which lies beyond the scope of this essay. A monk goes through formation, manages to sneak past that ten year crisis point, and gets another ten to fifteen years under his belt. All along he has been subject to a continuous barrage of religious material coming at him throughout the entire day. Then there comes that halfway point in his life with at least forty years (plus!) ahead of him which if the past is any guide, more the same stuff will be there to greet him. The basic Christian message has long sunk into his unconsciousness summed up by the response after the consecration at Mass: “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.”

Monks are becoming more sensitive to this vaguely perceived weariness yet are reluctant to discuss it. As someone informed me recently, it’s not unlike the image used in AA meetings where a huge elephant is present in a room. People have different glimpses of the beast from the corner of their eyes yet are afraid of publically admitting its presence. On top of this monastic communities are aging with less recruits coming in. A monk at the midway point of his career can look at some of the seniors in the infirmary more or less marking time with nothing to do. This is the next-to-the-end-of-the-line stage, the next stop being right outside in the adjacent cemetery. Like most people, monks generally don’t fear death but the process of getting there which can be more drawn out than in other

environments. It's like being in a nursing home full time. The younger monks are not unlike workers tending their patients who know that they will end up just like them, all this happening in the same place.

These observations concerning lesser known and rarely discussed aspects of monasticism center around the fact that people following a professional religious life are constantly exposed to the process of proclamation or kerygma, which is a public way stating the essence of Christianity. This promulgation unconsciously can become an end in itself, satisfying to a certain degree, in that a monk can identify with this continuous vocalizing of what one holds dear without going further. A person can actually fear the contents of what he or she is proclaiming or listening to; the act of proclaiming can be a way to ward off what it really means. Stop and consider this for a moment. Anyone who frequents liturgical events such as the Mass and Office can get a lot of mileage from what's being proclaimed there. Fine if you go on Sundays or just occasionally. It's a different story when you live with liturgical proclamation seven times a day, day after day. In the days when Latin was used in the liturgy, it was easier for those monks unacquainted with this language to ignore the content or words of the chant. They would go along fully with the chanting process, right down to the last detail. At the same time their unfamiliarity with Latin enabled them to use the text at hand as a springboard to get beyond the letter. This is possible with the liturgy in English but a bit more difficult to accomplish since it's our native tongue, even if a monk has memorized large chunks of the Office. Some of the old timers have wistfully longed for Latin not because they're "conservative" but because they found it easier to transcend the text and get into a contemplative mood.

+

In eras when the human life span was considerably shorter, it appeared more natural to incorporate the philosophical spirit into their lives. They were compelled to do so because everyone knew, albeit unconsciously, that time was short and they had to cram in a lot. Now things are more spread out, and the temptation is there to put off to tomorrow what can be done today. Yet we find ourselves with a unique paradox: despite more time, it doesn't translate into more leisure (which would be ideal). People are working harder with this extended life span and with less resources as opposed to those under the ban of one that was much shorter. The lesson? Everyone realizes that more is accomplished if time is short. When life is longer—and plenty of us know that length of days doesn't translate into quality—there's greater need for to develop a spirit of enthusiasm based upon sound philosophical insights. An example of this was at the end of the era of expectation of Christ's impending return. Gradually people drifted away from this position and knew they had to develop something for the long term. To a certain degree, this is an admission based on humility, for the Church felt a need that it couldn't endure on its own steam but required assistance from philosophical traditions of the time. An exception to this—and even this was shot through with inconsistencies—was the monastic tradition of the first several centuries which was inimical to philosophy. These folks attempted to go it alone and roundly condemned the introduction of philosophy within their circles. At least this was the official picture. The reality was something else. Surely even those monks knew that couldn't live of Scripture alone but required some solid backup.

This interplay between the Western (Greek) philosophical tradition and Christianity has remained alive for many centuries, right from the beginning through the medieval scholastics and down to modern times. In more recent years the relationship has deteriorated and requires an overhaul. It's easy to trace this deterioration to the 1960s; possibly, but somehow the situation is more complex. Here in the monastic context during the late 60s and early 70s some felt the need to incorporate ideas and practices from Eastern religions. People suddenly discovered the ability to step outside their cultural milieu and look at it more globally, if you will. Such insights were heady and perhaps contributed to

jettisoning the Western philosophical spirit, at least on the local level. The conservatism sometimes seen among younger people may have something to do with an awareness that philosophy has evaporated. Instead of re-introducing it—for they too weren't immune to its disappearance—they seek rites and practices which were discarded before the Council.

Most would agree that the very source of Western philosophy begins with the ancient Greeks, more specifically, Plato and Aristotle. My innate preference is with the former, so the reflections contained here will relate to one aspect of that most enigmatic figure, Socrates. Furthermore, Aristotle developed Plato's insights along specific lines which appeal to the more scientifically minded and those trained in the scholastic spirit. In the Catholic Church a person can go along and go along very well—all the way to sainthood—without even bothering about Plato, Socrates or Aristotle. They're simply not part of her kerygma. Nevertheless, history demonstrates that the kerygma is intimately bound up with the Hellenistic world in which the Church was not so much born but raised. Christianity left the cradle of Judaism almost immediately and went through her formative years at Rome and Athens. Academics have always known this, but general awareness of this heritage was lost as a means of animating societies in which Christianity had long been inserted. Church Fathers, especially those who wrote in Greek, borrowed heavily from Plato and subsequent interpretations of his works, a fact well recognized among historians. It isn't the place here to trace this out; an abundance of sources are available for the interested reader. My concern is more along the lines of a "how to" approach, that is, to examine whether we can realize one of the cores of our philosophical tradition, namely, that famous Socratic ignorance. No matter whether it's inside or outside the monastery. Putting it concretely, Socrates is distinguished for having claimed that he "knows nothing." Because of this self-proclaimed ignorance, he constantly questioned people—Socrates was really indiscriminate about this—and elicited a wide variety of responses from those he questioned. Ultimately it led to his death, for those in political power couldn't stand being made to look like fools.

Despite fascination with Socrates for over two thousand years, it's amazing that few records appear as to its implementation, of actually going about it. This "frontal" view of Socrates, his process questioning technically known as elenchos, is out there for all to see. On the other hand, the "back" side of his character is a cultivated ignorance, not one which was inborn, he wishes people to realize in their own lives as opposed to teaching it. If a person wished to learn something in the conventional sense, Socrates would send him or her to the Sophists who took great pride in their teaching skills.

+

We can now examine not so much the Platonic dialogues, a task well beyond the scope of this essay, but the spirit of Socratic inquiry which rests upon ignorance. The general character of Socratic ignorance is the opposite of knowledge as we've come to know it; this ignorance is carefully nourished as a response to some insight a person had when confronted with vanity of the world about us as well documented in the Book of Ecclesiastes. It's not unlike finding oneself in a place of exile or with an awareness that this world is not our home. We moderns can confuse knowledge with information and its manipulation through computer processing as well as "surfing" the Internet. Here knowledge is more a gathering of facts for practical implementation which may fall under the heading of efficient causality: a cause...information...which effects a result. Surely the Sophists would love it if they were alive today.

Causes which are efficient are distinct from formal causality where a form is transmitted into the very fiber of a person and brings about a transformation. One example of this in-forming is the slow and careful reading of a text as in the case of *lectio divina* noted above. Reducing the nobler aspects of our human nature to efficient causality makes them like so many billiard balls bumping into each other; they are manipulated similar to data on a computer screen. For example, when a reading from

Scripture is proclaimed during the liturgy it can be perceived unconsciously as a text “out there” which effects a cause in the listeners. Fine up to a point. The listeners may be moved temporarily by the reading but they go back to their regular lives where they perceive a disjunction between the reading and actual experience. Maybe this is not unlike the Gospel parable about the seeds, some of which fell on shallow ground and others on fertile soil: efficient causality can be represented by the former and formal causality by the latter.

Let's say a person decides to cut through all the interpretations accrued down the centuries and go ahead with imitating Socrates. This individual would commence by saying that he or she “knows nothing.” If we're really honest with ourselves, it's true, right there for the observation, for each of us is born in a state of ignorance which obviously requires elicitation. So the question comes down to, how do we hit upon this central realization? As I just remarked, we are born with it, easy to prove by observation. The challenge is not so much saying “I am ignorant” (and proud of it) but cultivating ignorance, of re-capturing its essence with which we came into the world. In other words, we begin our lives in ignorance which automatically brings us to posit the opposite of a beginning (our birth) which is death. In a sense cultivated ignorance is akin to death which we can replicate by following the process of dying minus the physical pain. Pain is often associated with actual death. Most of us claim that we don't fear death but the process of degeneration associated with getting there.

Despite the formidable barrier of physical degeneration we can imitate death more closely than at first glance. Here we may apply the famous “know thyself” dictum associated with the Delphic Oracle (a dictum which Socrates took seriously) as a starting point. Concretely, the imitation of death anticipates the ultimate shutting down of one's system: bodily activity, sensations, thoughts and emotions and anything else we wish to throw in. Scary stuff to be sure in that like physical death, what we're talking about is terra incognita. But how do we actually sit down and apply ourselves to dying while still alive? Spiritual literature is full of exhortations along this line but leaves it up to the reader to implement. Same in this short essay, but it has something to do with quieting one's mind, of letting go, terminology with which many of us are familiar. Although meditative practices can effect this, I prefer to shy away from them. The chief point to keep in mind is to pay very, very close attention to the act of dying. If we do, some insight into what's going on will emerge according to our individual inclinations.

The process of dying in a simulated fashion is simply another way—concrete in its all details minus physical pain—of getting to the root of absolute ignorance with which we were born and to which will return with the possibility of retreat. When you “die” you leave behind everything familiar. There comes a point when once our systems shut down, we're left with a residue (for lack of a better word), and what this residue consists of is a kind of presence...a presence absolutely devoid of all we just left behind. No proof of its existence can be offered. Here is where a person has to “die” to find out if such a presence is really there or not.

The only dissimilarity between this imitative gesture of death and the real thing is that the latter is thoroughly one-way. The former happens when we're still “alive” and can be repeated a number of times. The “residue” we end up with—that mysterious presence—can only be stated as that, for how can we speak about what is unspeakable? Here we are getting close to the proper domain of (Socratic) ignorance through a practice available right there for everyone. Nevertheless, our “death” lacks familiar reference points. At the same time death is not something we should look as inevitable and to gnash our teeth over. Here Socrates is a witness of sorts in that he talked a lot about death, especially in the **Phaedo**, and was quite cheerful viewing it in terms of that ignorance he had been cultivating many years previously.

Let's continue by saying that we have gotten into the practice of making alternations between regular

life and that imitation of death. The term “gesture” is good to use because a gesture isn’t something normally associated with a once-and-for-all action but something like short but sweet expressions. After a while a pattern emerges which can be visualized as two spheres. We can view them either rubbing up against each other, overlapping or being included within each other. The spheres equal life and death. For now the imagery is secondary. It is reduced to the simplest form of a circle which is representative of a concrete awareness that two different realities exist. Perhaps this borders on that age-old problem, the relationship of the one to the many. If you were to press an individual concerned with the commonplace issues of life, he or she would respond in terms echoing this dichotomy even though awareness of it may not be immediately present. It is not extraordinary for a state of perplexity to ensue because there really is no answer. The perplexity is left there unresolved or to be more technical, left unexamined. Here is where more serious seekers in the spiritual life can have recourse to techniques applied to meditation and can range all the way from Zen Buddhism to John of the Cross. Meditation is a classic means for bridging the one and the many. At the same time the notion of efficient causality can lurk in the background which whispers that meditation is the means which effects unity. In reality, meditation simply uncovers what had been present all along.

It’s not the intent of this essay to get into the merits and limitations of meditative practices but to situate Socratic ignorance in a broader context: a manner of life, a politeia, which in Greek means citizenship. Belonging to a city-state is more encompassing in that it concerns membership in a society with all its privileges and obligations. The notion of politeia stands at the roots of Western Civilization and was carried over into the New Testament where one key interpretation applies to membership in the heavenly Jerusalem of which the earthly Church is a prefigure. Thus Socratic ignorance as politeia is a way of conducting oneself which is more all-inclusive than “meditation.”

If we acknowledge our innate desire to bridge the gap between the one and the many, the first place to look is that inescapable distinction between death and life, more accurately, through imitation of the former. One of the first impulses that emerges from the imitation of death is a need to represent it. This immediately brings to mind the process by which we describe things. When you think of it, so much of our regular language is taken up with forming analogies, so we can assume it takes on special importance when dealing with matters of life and death. What’s the essence of an analogy? Apart from the dictionary definition I would say it’s a connection...a connection between personal experience and the external world, not entirely unlike the notion behind politeia. If we look at the heart of an analogy it is always restless and incomplete. Analogy may fall under the category of a linguistic bridge, rope, string. Regardless, it is thin yet pliable which links two disparate halves together. Such is the task of politeia which Plato himself outlines in the **Republic**.

Let’s take the example of a filament, a slender, thread-like streamer generally invisible to the naked eye. Applied to electricity, a filament consists of a wire in a light bulb which has a high melting point and is therefore more resistant to dissolving. A filament is also suggestive of harmony, for when you gaze at the night sky, it’s easy to see how this splendid sight can be an image of timelessness; the twinkling of stars thus easily tie in with this notion of a filament. The world’s literature is filled with references to the starry night sky, of how it represents our true home while earth is a place of exile. There comes to mind **Scipio’s Dream** by Cicero. I found reference to it the context of an article from a German magazine pertaining to St. Benedict’s vision recorded by Pope Gregory, of how he beheld the earth bathed in a single ray of light. Anyone can verify the essence of this reality, although interpretations may vary.

Thus night is the special time not only to behold its splendor but more practically what connects the realm above with the one below. The desire to make a connection is common to anyone who steps outside to behold this spectacle. Night allows us to re-establish this connection between heaven and

earth because the stars are hidden during the day. Even better, filaments...and I'm using it as a fictive device...are best perceived during the predawn hours, not so much in the evening or when night has fallen. The reason for this is that day has just ceased. One needs time, so to speak, not only to adjust to night vision but for the filament itself to become visible. In essence, these filaments are a type of signal given from one realm (above) to the other (below). The person receiving a signal needs to be sensitive to them, their language, which is unlike astronomical knowledge about the starry realm.

When I mentioned this insight to a friend, he amplified it by visualizing himself swinging from filament to filament, almost Tarzan-like. A bit frivolous yet not a bad idea, for filaments aren't there to contemplate as static entities. They are meant to actualize, to latch onto and see where they bring you. This image of merrily swinging away reveals an attitude towards things invisible as opposed to the more common approach of employing a practice or technique. Nothing wrong with this, but it tends to limit our resources and makes a distinction between practice and "down time" or when we're doing something other than what we'd really prefer. Keeping in mind that filaments are best seen at night, this "something else" may be represented in terms of the daylight hours. The filaments are fickle. We can't force their presence but get at them indirectly which is why the pre-dawn hours are important, a time when the world is asleep. That would be akin to trying to bottle these transitional period and save them for another time. Once you catch glimpse of a filament, there's no need to bind yourself to it as you would with a technique. Swinging from one filament to another is symbolic of greater freedom. Even when you loose sight of these connections between heaven and earth the remembrance of gleefully swinging from one filament to another is enough for giving heart during the daylight hours, symbolic of everyday life with its pressing concerns. Despite evidence to the contrary, all is well. That connection between heaven and earth remains and no proof is necessary, even during the daylight when things often go amiss.

Our imitation of death is the take-off point, the source from which springs all our insights into Socratic ignorance. Socrates would concur, for one can find verification in the **Phaedo** which gives an account of his last hours ("In fact, Simmias, those who practice philosophy in the right way are in training for dying and they fear death least of all men" (67d). It might be a bit confusing to use a word such as "knowledge" to suggest its opposite, ignorance as we've come to grasp this insight. Perhaps "familiarity" is better because it is akin to politeia which is comprehensive by nature and evades notions associated with the concept of a technique. By imitating death we do so neither in a morbid nor curious way, not even to see if anything lies on the other side. The "other side" does exist but not in the conventional sense of a place different yet essentially the same as "this side" of death. To test it out, try imitating death by shutting down all physical and mental operations. The bane of efficient causality can rear its head yet again in a realm where it should not be, that is, by saying that our praxis is solely responsible for bringing about the cause. That is to say, the act of shutting down our systems does not in itself effect the end result which is not death but the peace and joy that emanates from that mysterious presence.

2. Death has traditionally been painted as the worse fate we can undergo. Again, the only way to see if this claim has any truth is to imitate it. Even though we undertake the shutting down of our entire system—that which may be called our very selves—there is the undeniable paradox that upon returning from the simulation of death, we feel supremely happy and are at peace. Chances are that this is the very first time we've felt so in tune with ourselves. Part of this may be attributable to our praxis as being a kind of relaxation when we let go of deep rooted tensions, many of which had escaped our attention until now. Examine the experience a bit more in order to gain familiarity. Although this peace and happiness may result from release of what had been gripping us for many years, there remains a sense of something good. At this juncture we should put it in capitals—The Good—which is in line with the ancient Greek philosophic tradition of To Agathon. Perception of To Agathon brings to birth a kind of exuberance, an overflow not only of joy but of creativity.

A natural conclusion to *The Good* is its opposite, evil or wickedness which cannot be treated here. Suffice it to say that our imitation of death and familiarity with *To Agathon* reveals the presence of “the bad” which is independent of us. One way to verify this, albeit indirectly, is that upon returning to “life” from our simulation of death we have a sharper appreciation of the faculty of free choice, of opting for that which is better over that which is not. We could say that “the bad” produces something akin though opposite to the filaments. Instead of enabling us to swing Tarzan-like from one filament to the other, these evil filaments are not unlike a spider web which ensnares us and hinders movement.

How can we better flesh-out the nature of these beneficial filaments? Where can we situate such invisible, intangible connectors? Keep in mind that “filament” is a fictive device, a term with some basis in physical reality which acts to connect two (disparate) realities. We could situate the connection in our memory and spell it out as follows. Let’s say we have experimented a bit with the dying process and find it meaningful. Awareness of it is carried back from “death” into regular “life” by means of our recollective faculty. In brief, we *remember* that we have died. In order to understand this better, turn to that distinction between formal and efficient causality. Once we return to “life,” our memory of “death” is carried over but in a way that does not “cause” anything to happen, to put it in conventional terms. This type of memory is a form...a morphe...which alters our lives: it falls under the realm of formal causality in that it brings over a form (from “death”) into ourselves as a receptacle (into “life”).

It’s fascinating how a memory of “death” can have such tremendous impact on “life” in that it effects a thorough transfiguration on the latter. The Greek word *anamnesis* (memory) may be applied here which connotes a re-incorporation of something from the past into the present. This can evoke images along the lines of efficient causality where a particular memory reaches forward in time to alter the present. Also, the notion of “past” and “future” aren’t quite accurate; in the realm of *anamnesis* such temporal distinctions are secondary. Once this is appreciated, we’re in a position to grasp how the analogical process can describe past experiences, that is, the *anamnesis* of them. This differs from conventional memories and analogies that describe them and is more in line with the Church has grasped right from the beginning of her existence. Still, the perception—hard to shake off—that persists is a disjuncture between past, present and future. Such is not the case when we view memory-as-*anamnesis* because the form...morphe...of the past in-forms itself into the present which in turn governs the future. Even though we experience the living effect of conventional memories from the past, what we want most of all is peace and happiness. Common experience reveals this isn’t the case because these memories lack real presence and instead produce sentiments of varying shades of emotion. This ancient way of viewing *anamnesis* has largely been lost yet constitutes an essential part of our makeup. One passage from Plato’s **Phaedo** may throw *anamnesis* into better perspective:

“It was seen to be possible for someone to see or hear or otherwise perceive something, and by this to be put in mind of something else which he had forgotten and which is related to it by similarity or difference. One of two things follows, as I say: either we were born with the knowledge of it, and all of us know it throughout life, or those who later, we say, are learning, are only recollecting, and learning would be recollection.” (76a)

“Because Simmias cannot make a choice between the two, Socrates puts the answer in form of a question: “A man who has knowledge would be able to give an account of what he knows, or would he not?”

Another way of putting this *anamnesis* is in the **Phaedrus**:

“Only a few remain whose memory is good enough; and they are beside themselves, and their

experience is beyond their comprehension because they cannot fully grasp what it is that they are seeing.” (250a)

Even though we have situated memory in a larger context, one can argue that its contents boil down to... well, nothing, because it is a memory of “death.” As we instinctively know, death is the complete absence of everything and therefore absence of memories. On the other hand we have that irreducible experience—gained from out in the field, nothing we’ve concocted through our imaginations—which makes us happy and at peace: in short, exuberant. These are two effects of anamnesis (It may be better for now on to stick with the Greek term instead of the usual “memory”) which are undeniable and beyond contestation. Indeed, people who haven’t “died” often contest this claim. They may taunt us with our premise which runs something like the following question. If death is the equivalent of nothingness and you really know that nothing is the end result, what kind of knowledge could you possibly come up with? Surely they must be illusions. Thus the claim that we can “get knowledge” from imitating death is meaninglessness in the extreme. A retort, albeit tacit, can be made: “living” persons who posit such questions are in essence dead. They view death not from life but from the same plane, death.

The following neatly describes the role of memory/anamnesis as just posited:

“Socrates: Now I want you to suppose, for the sake of the argument, that we have in our souls a block of wax, larger in one person, smaller in another, and of purer wax in one case, dirtier in another; in some men rather hard, in others rather soft, while in some it is of the proper consistency.

“Theaetetus: All right, I’m supposing that.

“Socrates: We may look upon it, then, as a gift of Memory, the mother of the Muses. We make impressions upon this of everything we wish to remember among the things we have seen or heard or thought of ourselves; we hold the wax under our perceptions and thoughts and take a stamp from them, in the way in which we take the imprints of signet rings. Whatever is impressed upon the wax we remember and know so long as the image remains in the wax; whatever is obliterated or cannot be impressed, we forget and do not know.” **Theaetetus** 191d-e

The objection posed at the conclusion of the last paragraph may be allied with a fear of adopting, of actually undertaking, the praxis of ignorance which we associate with the person of Socrates, a flesh and blood human being who was a pioneer in this regard. Never mind where he got it; nobody really knows except a cryptic account of the Delphic Oracle claiming that Socrates was the wisest person on earth. The point is that Socrates actually put into practice ignorance as a mode of living. Even better, he knew that he did not know...a gesture made with one’s whole being which speaks directly to the actuality of our innate ignorance. That’s the big difference. A lot of us walk around ignorant and don’t know it. Knowing that we know it is another story.

At this point it might be better to substitute “not knowing” for the noun “ignorance” since the gerund is suggestive of something in a continual state of development. Not knowing has no beginning nor end and thus can’t be tied down with any real exactitude. Folks who question the simulated experience of death are curious to know about it while at the same time they remain wary. In back of everyone’s mind is the realization that we will physically die and to press home our ultimate demise doesn’t help. Yet it can in that what we know for sure—the end of human life—gives birth to a multitude of opinions. The most pressing one of them all is the familiar question, “Is there life after death?” If the person asking this question falls under the category of one who is “dead,” he or she could turn the question around into, “Is there life before death?” Socrates did something like this with his interlocutors and for the most part didn’t get an adequate response. It’d be hard to get a reply from people who aren’t

alive.

+

We now arrive at a crucial point, the “place” where opinions are formed, which proves to be a formidable barrier when it comes to the acquisition of knowledge derived from the simulation of death. It gets back to the starting point of this essay, boundedness, for if you stick with a fairly constant awareness of boundedness as the warp and woof of human experience—another way of stating this Socratic ignorance—you realize that just about anything a person may offer can be reduced to an opinion (*doxa*). No matter if the opinion is true or false; for the moment it seems best to forego paying attention to the quality, if you will. Socrates himself was familiar with opinions in his unflagging questioning of people in an attempt to shed light upon his own ignorance and that of others. He saw it closely connected with physical death, and his reflections on the matter are set down in the **Phaedo**. To the untrained eye there seems little or no distinction between the two: both are “ignorant” but in completely different ways.

A person who has experimented with the simulation of death comes to see more clearly the opinions he or she has personally formulated over a period of time. They come to sharper awareness upon that return to “life” spoken of earlier. The discovery is done in the privacy of one’s own conscience, and it takes some courage to realize how constrained we have been by opinions. Awareness of them emerges pretty much in quick succession after that initial feeling of peace and happiness. These are obstacles to be surmounted over a period of time, often quite a long period of time. Of course it’s easier to observe opinions in other persons, how they come to light, almost like fanciful creatures crawling from their holes. Even the person offering them isn’t fully aware of his or her conditioning. If you come back from “death” and know that for the first time that you really know nothing, people instinctively feel that you have been engaged in questionable activity. It’s evident both by the expression on your face but even more so by dialogue. Subversive...Cheshire-catlike...may be another way of putting it, like a person who knows something that you don’t.

The word “irony” applies to language signifying the opposite from what we mean to say in an outright fashion. It can approximate a type of deceit and would fail if it weren’t for an almost wry operation of humor. The Greek term *eironikos* means “dissembling, feigning ignorance,” which enables us to look at things in both directions, kind of Janus-like. *Eironikos* is better suited for our purposes here because when you pretend (in the technical sense) not to know anything you’re able to elicit responses from people by making them feel at ease and letting their masks down. At the same time you can discern a glimmer of knowledge in their possession as opposed to surface-level opinions. The person with whom you’re speaking may not have the slightest idea whether or not you’re pretending or just some kind of country bumpkin.

Irony loses its role in a society which has become flat or uniform, where the soil isn’t deep enough for creative insights. Something like this might be going on in the Church today. Not that her message is “flat.” People seem to be rolling around with the whole ball of religious wax, so to speak, and realizing that something has to be injected into the mix for rejuvenation. At this juncture perhaps we can look not so much to Christianity but to its “ur-root” or the Platonic dialogues...better, the person of Socrates who knew that he didn’t know. Just look at how successfully Socrates employed irony to shift knowledge from opinions with his interlocutors. If you want to imitate him, try it out in the Church today and see how far you’ll get. Regardless of the results, this practice is at the core of Western Civilization and is bound pop up here and there whether anyone likes it or not. As a brief side note, St. John of the Cross speaks of the “dark night of the soul.” Perhaps the “Socratic dark night” of not knowing is more challenging, that is, of realizing that your not knowing stands over against a multitude of opinions held dear by people.

Once we discover that the means of acquiring, maintaining and passing on knowledge is for all practical purposes the communication of opinions (“true opinions,” as Plato would say more technically), a potential crisis can loom on the horizon. If what was acquired to date has seemed so certain and was backed up by persons in authority, even saints, along with a long and venerable tradition, where do we go from here? The nature of opinion in and by itself was left pretty much unexamined to date. Surely noble human endeavors are not to be relegated to “mere opinion” only. That would be relativizing the best of what the past has achieved and passed on. Still, there’s an uneasy feeling that the nature of opinion hangs like a cloud over genuine knowledge. Let’s say that a monk actually dies about now—around forty years of age—the former maximum life span. Knowledge on which he had based his life would suffice to carry him through the gates of death. At least that was the common “opinion.”

Here we may bring up the Greek word *praxis* which has a broader meaning. It is often translated as “practice” and contains the notion of incorporating something into one’s life. *Praxis*, in turn, has traditionally been linked to its opposite (in the sense of being complementary), *theoria* which is commonly translated as “contemplation.” However, it has a broader meaning just like *praxis*. Usually *theoria* precedes *praxis*: you put into practice...in-corporate what you’ve contemplated, for you have to have some kind of insight into what you’re about to do. A bit later or after some experience has been accumulated, *theoria* verifies if you’re on the right track as far as this *praxis* goes. The constant proclamation within liturgical gatherings is a kind of *praxis*...a doing...which presupposes the need for *theoria*, of grasping what people are doing there. In the monastic context this may not be evident at first because everyone who has joined the community has come in mid-stream, as it were. The community had been in existence before a young man entered and already was going about its *kerygma*. Thus right off the bat a newcomer starts with *praxis* and is expected to pick up a *theoria* of it, kind of on the run. In this case we may say that the cart of *praxis* is perceived as being before the horse of *theoria*, and the two are perpetually catching up with each other. A newcomer has to do quite a lot of back-tracking in *theoria* before he gets into the swing of his new life-long *praxis*. That is, he has to trace the roots of a given custom or practice...“*theoria-ze*” it, as it were, and then see how he can “*praxis*” it.

This *praxis* is difficult to nail down and isn’t identical to the notion of a technique; even “practice” isn’t quite accurate, because there seem to be so many variations of it in the concrete. Returning to the monastic context, consider the Divine Office. *Theoria*-ically St. Benedict says in his **Rule** that nothing is to be preferred to its implementation. *Paxis*-ising is quite another thing, for the newcomer will quickly discover that everyone isn’t present at all the Hours. So many variables are present in a given community that it’s virtually impossible to articulate them all. Here we are confronted with a kind of double-bind where the real doesn’t live up to the ideal, quite frustrating to anyone who hasn’t engaged in proper *theoria*.

+

This essay, lacking in many ways, may terminate with a few remarks concerning *aporia* commonly translated as “perplexity.” This isn’t normal mental confusion but one which permeates a person body and soul. It is intimately connected with the nature of an opinion or *doxa*, better, when a persons realizes that he or she suddenly discovers that what was held dear is in serious doubt. Surely this is one of the most distressing experiences we can imagine. No small wonder that when Meno experienced such *aporia* he lashed out at Socrates (who brought him into this state) calling him a torpedo fish which “makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb” (**Meno** 80b). People are accustomed to being refuted and embarrassed, but it’s a wholly different experience when their presumed knowledge is reduced to an opinion. Even more so when the alternative presented is by one who is

conscious that he or she knows nothing.

A quintessential example of the frustration effected by *aporia* which in turn is brought about by refutation of one's opinions may be presented as follows:

"They cross-examine someone when he thinks he's saying something though he's saying nothing. Then, since his opinions will vary inconsistently, these people will easily scrutinize them. They collect his opinions together during the discussion, put them side by side, and show that they conflict with each other at the same time on the same subjects in relation to the same things and in the same respects. The people who are being examined see this, get angry at themselves, and become calmer toward others...The people who cleanse the soul likewise think the soul, too, won't get any advantage from any learning that's offered to it until someone shames it by refuting it, removes the opinions that interfere with learning, and exhibits it cleansed, believing that it knows only those things that it does know, and nothing more." (Sophist, 230b-d)

This cross-examination or *elenchos* is Socrates' favorite way of discovering the opinions people hold. Despite their occasional basis in truth which can spill over into a life conducted well in the moral sense, people can't transmit them to their friends or children. Again refer to the *Meno* where virtue cannot be taught:

"It is surely clear that he (Thucydides) would not have taught his boys what it costs money to teach, but have failed to teach them what costs nothing—making them good men—if that could be taught? Or was Thucydides perhaps an inferior person who had not many friends among the Athenians and the allies? He belonged to a great house; he had great influence in the city and among the other Greeks, so that if virtue could be taught he would have found the man who could make his sons good men, be it a citizen or a stranger, if he himself did not have the time because of his public concerns. But, friend Anytus, virtue can certainly not be taught." (94d).

Here is a good example of the frustration a virtuous person may experience in not being able to transmit virtue to his child. The same may apply to a newcomer in monastic life. He can't be "taught" how to conduct himself. Instead, the nature of the life with all its human messiness—the novice discovers this real fast—is the teacher *par excellence* not so much by focusing upon deficiencies in his fellow monks but by indirectly pointing to his personal messiness. In other words, the monastic life itself becomes an *elenchos*. Senior monks are there simply witnesses to their own deficiencies or by relating accounts, especially through the spontaneous form of stories of how they came to grips with their innate poverty.

Ironically, accounts of personal neediness inspire the most. They are pointers. which invite, albeit indirectly, the novice to discover within himself the sources of monastic life which cannot be transmitted. It seems that after many trials and errors, a senior monk gets to be like Thucydides who is virtuous by nature but can't transmit directly to a junior. Perhaps at this juncture we are getting to the dynamics of monastic culture, any culture for that matter. Expression of personal experience through narratives (i.e., stories) starts with one's opinions and proceeds to how these opinions were frustrated. A monk passes through difficult periods and recounts them, I'd say with gusto, to people in their formative years. As noted above, the essence of these difficulties can be distilled to an encounter with death or something akin to it...not physical but of "real" death in that everything once held dear has been taken away. The person or monk listening to these stories hears them not as a transmission of how to live monastic life as he would through books but as how a real person confronted a dilemma and came through it unscathed. In other words, the story-teller has passed from "death" to "life," not from life to death. Now the story has evolved into a connection between the story-teller and senior monk with the junior who is empowered—not by an external authority—but by the inner

transformative process of listening.

“Some people know what belongs to them without knowing themselves, while others know what belongs to their belongings. It seems that it’s the job of one man, and one skill, to know all these things: himself, his belongings, and his belongings’ belongings.” **Alcibiades** 133d

These words can easily apply to the senior monk-as-story-teller who combines in himself, more often quite unaware that he’s doing it, of what lies at the heart of monastic life and culture. He starts off with knowing himself, his belongings (those frustrations which reduced him to *aporia*) and finally the accounts or stories which belong to these frustrations.

+

Earlier I mentioned the role of allegory which the Church found essential to formulate her mission but was recently abandoned (though currently enjoying a certain renewal). If we trace the origins of any valid culture—the monastic one is what concerns us here, yet it always has been at the heart of all cultures—we see that it’s basis is very simple, based upon story-telling broadly speaking. Allegory is part of telling a story, so this process has always been present and tends to sneak in through the back door, if you will. For example, most monks recall with fondness stories they’ve heard in their formative years. They have never been forgotten but passed down to younger men in turn. Thus allegory is a more expanded process of story-telling which relies on some elements of fiction, not make-believe, to get across its point.

Story-telling is well suited for a bounded environment such as the monastery, for it knits disparate generations together, especially since they remain in one place for a life time. It thus tends to loosen...expand...the physical confines of enclosure in a way which might be looked at by other folks seeking to renew their own environments or cultures. So if allegory is employed to convey both personal and collective experiences, we can say that it is two-fold. One part is rooted in reality and the other is fond of throwing in either exaggerated or embellished details. The latter is accepted as part and parcel of story-telling; without it the plot wouldn’t succeed.

I mention the allegorical process within the context of this essay dealing with boundedness in order to tie in another feature that impinges upon awareness of our limited condition, monastic or otherwise. Allegory and by extension the fictive enterprise as a whole reaches out beyond the confines of immediate experience and incorporates within the present elements either from the past or future. A good example of the latter is science fiction. As I noted elsewhere, I had hit upon some articles by Hans Vaihinger and later his book, **The Philosophy of As If**. Quite an interesting discovery to be sure! It took place within the larger context of Emmanuel Kant’s **Critique of Pure Reason**.

Vaihinger defines fiction as a device, very flexible, for solving problems and for connecting two disparate elements or proportions. It has wide application: physics, law, biology, philosophy and theology. The bulk of **As If** is taken up (somewhat tediously) with these example some of which are more appealing than others and admittedly easier to grasp. One notable example comes from jurisprudence. A wealthy man who makes out a will of a million dollars to his son. This son has an accident which leaves him brain dead though his vital signs are there. The law would treat the son—physically alive—as legally dead, better, *as if* the son were dead. This example reveals that the coherence of Vaihinger’s philosophy focuses upon the small yet significant particles “as if” (*als ob*). By it a wide variety of interpretations become available. When you look at personal experience, trying to describe something to another person, we have recourse to “as if.” It is an ideal tool for expanding a bounded environment or way of viewing reality to see greater possibilities. Just the fact that such possibilities exist out there is thrilling. In this way these options can be inserted into our bounded existence and

help spread it out, so to speak, without actually moving in time and space.

Perhaps a quote from Vaihinger may shed light where he speaks of the physicist attempting to describe the reality of atomic structure:

“What, then, is contained in the as if? There must apparently be something else hidden in it apart from the unreality and impossibility of the assumption in the conditional sentence. These particles clearly also imply a decision to maintain the assumption formally, in spite of these difficulties. Between the as and if, wie and wenn, als and ob, comme and si, qua-si, a whole sentence lies implied. What, then, does it mean if we say that matter must be treated as if it consisted of atoms? It can only mean that empirically given matter must be treated as it would be treated if it consisted of atoms or that the curve must be treated as it would be treated if it consisted of infinitesimals. There is, then, a clear statement of the necessity (possibility or actuality), of an inclusion under an impossible or unreal assumption. (Chapter Twenty-Two, from a scanned text)

This example of atoms is particularly interesting since Vaihinger formulated it when atomic theory was just coming to public consciousness, at the threshold when it was about to enter common parlance. Today we know that physical reality consists of atoms and take it on faith because our sense show otherwise. Here “as if” assumes the role of a fictive device partly based on reality and partly not, kind of having an in between presence like the filaments which connect the visible and invisible realms.”

What if we were to apply this “as if” principle to monastic life? Would it update, so to speak, the traditional role of allegory, restore it for better application? Should a monk walk around claiming that he lived in the abbey “as if” he were a monk, most likely he’d run into trouble. Although this isn’t recommended, it can be tried out discreetly in the field. We can take the entirety of a monk’s career in light of the longer life span frequently commented upon here. It embraces the “shorter” span of approximate forty years as well as the “second half” from forty onwards. To simplify the matter, let’s say that during the first half a monk lives in the monastery *because* he is a monk. During the second half he lives in the monastery *as if* he were a monk. The first is absolutely necessary for the second, never the other way around. During the second half a monk has incorporated the lessons learned from the first, especially frustrations and learning how to deal with them. These can all be posited in terms of encounters with death. However, the simulation of death may not occur at this juncture. The “as if” period has imparted sufficient practice with frustrations, even very serious ones, making what the monk now comes across as familiar territory.

As a brief addendum to the above, the Gospels are full of examples about the urgency of the Kingdom of God, of how we have to be on guard and watchful. These injunctions must have had affected Jesus’ listeners as they did for subsequent generations. Question is, if we’re living much longer than our predecessors, how does this urgency apply especially in the monastic context? The question has to be answered in the affirmative; to say “no” would be going against the grain. Nevertheless this “yes” has to be qualified or modified by getting off a purely Gospel approach—at first glimpse sounds like heresy—and adopt Socratic ignorance, of knowing that we don’t know. This principle seems more adapted to the human condition or better, an extended life span.

During the “as if” span (i.e., the second half of one’s life) it’s crucial to hearken back to the simulation of death which in a sense borders on fiction in that it isn’t death per se but approximates it. To begin with, try it out and see if it works. That’s the most important step, getting acclimatized before any description is attached onto the experience. Once we’ve discovered that the simulation of death works, is repeatable and can be verified with other persons, it is on the way to being established as a working principle. These other two steps are necessary because the simulation of death encompasses everything. There is nothing fictive about the experience, but the “as if” particles are well suited to

indicate how we relate our simulated contacts with each other. Matter-of-fact descriptions don't really work; they're too literal especially when we're dealing with a bounded environment which is in greater need for inspiration from sources outside its restricted sphere.

Furthermore, descriptions run the risk of devolving into opinions which Socrates enjoys putting to flight in people he encountered. In the case of simulated death when we spontaneously say something like "It is *as if* I had left this world for a better one," it's helpful to catch ourselves caught in the "as if" act and distinguish it from a hypothesis. Such a supposition is provisional by nature yet valid until it has been sufficiently verified by a wide enough group of people. A hypothesis isn't quite real; is on the road to reality, and is discarded once what is real has been accepted. On the other hand, a fiction is "a provisional auxiliary construct (which) ought to drop out in the course of time and make way for its real function; but in so far as it is a pure fiction, it ought, at any rate logically, to disappear as soon as it has done its duty" (Vaihinger, Chapter 22, scanned text).

For monks, "as if" can open up doors which have been closed during the first half of his career when he followed the directives and tradition of his way of life. That period (as another essay noted) may be termed one of "because." In it a person is too busy, as it were, learning his new tradition, how it works, and the way his fellows comport themselves as witnesses to it. "Because" is associated with a very old way of handing down tradition: "because our fathers have told us" (etc). It's also an easy way out, of accepting principles of a society in which we find ourselves and not questioning them. You do this in a monastery to some extent because of the vow of obedience. More specifically, "because" is a commonly sanctioned and tacit way the monastery comports itself and gets along in the world. Despite the advantages and pitfalls, it isn't enough, the reason for shifting gears to an "as if" mode. This mode is open-ended to the future and the options that may lie there. It seamlessly fits over the "because" mode and is indistinguishable to the untrained eye. Putting it somewhat crudely, a visitor who walks into the monastery doesn't see "because" monks on one hand and "as if" monks on the other. Same applies to the monks themselves; it would only be recognized by those who've opted for this fictive stance concerning their mode of life. "As if" monks or any other such related group would come more fully into light when they consciously know they are engaged in a fictive gesture, not an opinionated one, and know that they know this is operative, that is, adapting the Socratic stance a bit.

This combination of several insights—boundedness, monasticism, expanded life span, Socratic ignorance, the simulation of death and "as if" is an odd if not wild mixture, perhaps as far as they have been presented in this essay. Since the elements are disparate and require further integration through disciplined reasoning, I offer them here in a tentative fashion. The document should...must...be revisited at later date and with plenty of constructive feedback. Several of these insights may be put together more coherently and others eliminated or put together with others and not come off in such a rambling fashion. The same applies to the five appendices below. They all contain good material and tie in with some points this essay tries to make. The appendices too are subject to further revision or expansion which might evolve along a wholly different direction.

Since Gregory of Nyssa has been a favorite for at least thirty years, permit me to close with a quote from his **Song Commentary** (J.324-5) which sums up much of what I attempted to relate here. Gregory's text includes several elements touched upon here in his own terms: night, perception, search and knowing, all of which are situated in a Hellenistic milieu:

"How can what is invisible be seen at night? The bridegroom bestows upon the soul a perception of his presence although a clear apprehension escapes it since his invisible nature lies hidden. What is the mystic initiation which the soul experiences during this night? It is the Word touching the door. We understand by this door the human mind searching for what is hidden; through it the object sought after enters. Therefore, truth stands outside our souls because, as the Apostle says [1Cor 13.12], we

know in part. Truth knocks at the mind by means of allegory and mystery saying "Open," and with this summons the bridegroom suggests a way we can open the door. He gives us certain keys, that is, the beautiful words of the Song. Names such as sister, companion, dove and perfect one are clearly the keys which open what is hidden."

Five Appendices

References to Socratic Ignorance from Plato's Dialogues

NB: all references from Plato's works have been taken from **Plato: Complete Works** edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997).

Alcibiades (117d-118a)

Soc: So you don't waver about what you don't know, if in fact you know that you don't know.

Alcib: Apparently not.

Soc: Don't you realize that the errors in our conduct are caused by this kind of ignorance, of thinking that we know when we don't know?

Alcib: What do you mean by that?

Soc: Well, we don't set out to do something unless we think we know what we're doing, right?

Alcib: Right.

Soc: But when people don't think they know how to do something, they hand it over to somebody else, right?

Alcib: Of course.

Soc: So the sort of people who don't think they know how to do things make no mistakes in life, because they leave those things to other people.

Alcib: You're right.

Soc: Well, who are the ones making the mistakes? Surely not the ones who know?

Alcib: Of course not.

Soc: Well, since it's not those who know, and it's not those who don't know and know they don't know, is there anyone left except those who don't know but think they do know?

Alcib: No, they're the only ones left.

Soc: So this is the ignorance that causes bad things; this is the most disgraceful sort of stupidity.

Apology (29)

To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am

wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this, that, as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have. I do know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong.

Aporia in Plato's Works

3. The definition of the Greek noun *aporia* may be defined as follows: difficulty of passing, straits, impossibility, difficulty of dealing with or getting at, perplexity, for want of one, shortage, question for discussion, difficulty, puzzle.

Apology

38.d3: Perhaps you think that I was convicted for lack of such words as might have convinced you.

38.d6: I was convicted because I lacked not words but boldness and shamelessness.

Phaedo

108.c1: Such a soul wanders alone completely at a loss until a certain time arrives and it is forcibly led to its proper dwelling place.

Cratylus

413.c8: Thereupon, my friend, I am even more perplexed than when I set out to learn what the just is.

415.c5: *Aporia* (perplexity, inability to move on) is a vice of the same sort, and so, it seems, is everything else that hinders movement and motion.

Theatetus

151.a7: They (women in child labor) suffer the pains of labor, and are filled day and night with distress.

168.a4: If you observe this distinction, those who associate with you will blame themselves for their confusion and their difficulties, not you.

168.c2: You will not follow the practice of most men, who drag words this way and that at their pleasure, so making every imaginable difficulty for one another.

174.c5: He causes entertainment not only to Thracian servant girls but to all the common herd, by tumbling into wells and every sort of difficulty through his lack of experience.

187.d2: I have something on my mind which has often bothered me before, and got me into great difficulty...I can't say what it is, this experience we have, and how it arises in us.

200.a12: So, after going a long way round, we are back at our original difficulty.

Sophist

236.e3: This appearing, and this seeming but not being, and this saying things but not true things—all these issues are full of confusion just as they always have been.

237.e7: Then our way of speaking would have reached the height of confusion.

238.d1: So was I wrong just now when I said that I would formulate the biggest confusion about it, when we have this other one to state which is even bigger?

238.d5: My good young friend, don't you notice on the basis of the thing we said that that which is not even confuses the person who's refuting it in just this way?

243.b10: Earlier in my life I used to think I understood exactly what someone meant when he said just what we're confused about now, namely, this is not.

245.d12: And millions of other issues will also arise, each generating indefinitely many confusions, if you say that being is only two or one.

249.d10: Now I think we'll recognize how confused our investigation about it is.

250.d8: When we were asked what we should apply the name *that which is not to*, we became completely confused.

250.e6: But there's now hope, precisely because both *that which is* and *that which is not* are involved in equal confusion.

Statesman

273.d5: ...it should not, storm-tossed as it is, be broken apart in confusion and sink into the boundless sea of unlikeness.

274.c5: As a result of all this they were in great difficulties.

Parmenides

129.e6: But I would, as I say, be much more impressed if someone were able to display this same difficulty, which you and Parmenides went through in the case of visible things.

130.c3: Parmenides, I've often found myself in doubt whether I should talk about those in the same way as the others or differently.

133.a8: Then do you see, Socrates, how great the difficulty is if one marks things off as forms, by themselves by themselves?

133.b1: I assure you, that you do not yet have an inkling of how great the difficulty is if you are going to posit one form in each case every time you make a distinction among things.

Philebus

15.c2: It is these problems of the one and many, but not those others, Protarchus, that cause all sorts of difficulties if they are not properly settled, but promise progress if they are.

15.e4: The boundless multitude, however, in any and every kind of subject leaves you in boundless ignorance, and makes you count for nothing and amount to nothing, since you have never worked out the amount and number of anything at all.

20.a1: But we should not take it that the aim of our meeting is universal confusion; if we cannot solve the problem, you must do it, for you promised.

29.b1: Very much so. We are indeed battered by difficulties in our discussion.

34.d4: We will certainly lose something, Protarchus; by discovering what we are looking for now, we will lose our ignorance about it.

51.a9: ...that there are others that have the appearance of enormous size and great variety, but which are in truth commingled with pain or with respite from severe pains suffered by soul and body.

Rival Lovers

135.a1: At this point we all found ourselves completely at a loss.

Charmides

169.c6: When Critias heard this and saw that I was in difficulties, then, just as in the case of people who start yawning when they see other people doing it, he seemed to be affected by my troubles.

169.d1: ...he said nothing clear but concealed his predicament.

Laches

196.b2: Nicias appears to me unwilling to make a gentlemanly admission that he is talking nonsense, but he twists this way and that in an attempt to cover up his difficulty.

200.e5: But as the matter stands, we were all in the same difficulty. Why then should anybody choose one of us in preference to another?

Lysis

216.c5: I hardly know myself. I'm getting downright dizzy with the perplexities of our argument.

Euthydemus

292.e6: As I was saying, we are in just as great difficulties as ever, or even worse, when it comes to finding out what that knowledge is which will make us happy.

293.a1: As far as I was concerned, Crito, when I had fallen into this difficulty, I began to exclaim at the top of my lungs and to call upon the two strangers as though they were the Heavenly Twins to rescue both myself and the boy from the third wave of the argument.

301.a2: This put me in a terrible fix, which I thought I deserved for my grumbling.

306.d6: All the same, Socrates, as I kept telling you, I am in doubt about what I ought to do with my sons.

Protagoras

321.c7: While he was floundering about at a loss, Prometheus arrived to inspect the distribution and saw that while the other animals were well provided with everything, the human race was naked.

324.d4: Now, on to your remaining difficulty, the problem you raise about good men teaching their sons everything that can be taught and making them wise in these subjects.

Gorgias

522.a9: What do you think a doctor, caught in such an evil predicament, could say?

Meno

72.a2: And there are very many other virtues, so that one is not at a loss to say what virtue is.

78.e5: Then failing to secure gold and silver, whenever it would not be just to do so, either for oneself or another, is not this failure to secure them also virtue?

80.a4: Now I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed.

84.c5: Do you think that before he would have tried to find out that which he thought he knew though he did not, before he fell into perplexity and realized he did not know and longed to know?

84.c10: Look then how he will come out of his perplexity while searching alone with me.

Greater Hippias

286.c5: Just now someone got me badly stuck when I was finding fault with parts of some speeches for being foul and praising other parts as fine.

298.c5: We could well be thinking we're in the clear again, when we've gotten stuck on the same point about the fine as we did a moment ago.

304.c3: I wander around and I'm always getting stuck. If I make a display of how stuck I am to you wise men, I get mud-spattered by your speeches when I display it.

Menexenus

243.a3: ...but when their city found herself thwarted on account of the length of the voyage and could not reinforce them, they gave out and came to grief.

244.d6: Even the king reached such a point of perplexity that his deliverance came full circle to arising from nowhere other than this city which he had kept zealously trying to destroy.

247.b7: ...but it is shameful and unmanly to enjoy the use of a treasure of wealth and honors and fail to hand it on to the following generation because of a lack of acquisitions and public recognition on one's own part.

Republic

405.b3: Yet isn't it even more shameful when someone not only spends a good part of his life in court defending himself or prosecuting someone else but, through inexperience of what is fine, is persuaded to take pride in being clever at doing injustice and then exploiting every loophole and trick to escape conviction.

456.c2: All of the various troubles men endure in these matters are obvious, ignoble, and not worth discussing.

496.b2: A noble and well brought-up character, for example, kept down by exile, who remains with philosophy according to his nature, because there is no one to corrupt him, or a great soul living in a small city, who disdains the city's affairs and looks beyond them.

556.d5: Or rather isn't it often the case that a poor man...stands in battle next to a rich man, reared in the shade and carrying a lot of excess flesh, and sees him panting and at a loss?

Timaeus

22.d6: Our Nile, always our savior, is released and at such times, too, saves us from this disaster.

Critias

109.e3: Then, for many generations, these survivors and their children lived in distress for their survival and gave thought to their needs.

Laws

678.d2: They suffered from a scarcity of timber, because iron, copper and mineral workings in general had been overlaid with sludge and had been lost to sight, so that it was virtually impossible to refine fresh supplies of metal.

679.b2: His intention was that whenever the human race was reduced to such a desperate condition it could still take root and develop.

680.d8: And they arise among these people who live scattered in separate households and individual families in the confusion that follows the cataclysms.

684.e2: ...his policy of land redistribution and remission of debts earns him only curses. It's enough to make any man despair.

699.b2: On land they expected the same thing to happen this time; and as for the sea, they realized that escape by this route was out of the question, in view of the thousand or more ships coming to the attack.

709.a5: If it isn't pressures of war that overturn a constitution and rewrite the laws, it's the distress of grinding poverty.

740.e2: This approach should do the trick, and if in the last resort we are in complete despair about variations from our number of 5040 households...we have that old expedient at hand, which we have often mentioned before.

754.b5: I mean, any child is going to fall out with his parents sooner or later, but while he's young and can't help himself, he loves them and they love him.

774.c8: (doweries) will not affect their prospects of a long life one way or the other, because in this state no one will go without the necessities of life.

776.c8: The Spartan helot-system (state serfs) is probably just about the most difficult and contentious institution in the entire Greek world.

780.b6: ...but I suppose it (eating together) was dictated by war or some other equally serious emergency that pressed hard on a small people in a critical situation.

788.c1: That's why in spite of all the difficulties of legislating on such points, we can't simply say nothing about them.

830.b6: ...and certainly we wouldn't be put off by the idiots who might laugh at us.

832.b4: I dare say it looks as if I'm putting off getting round to it because I don't know what to say?

837.a4: But one term covers all three, and that causes no end of muddle and confusion.

855.b5: ...so as to prevent any farm becoming unworked because of a shortage of money.

861.b1: We have not yet found a way out of our confusion in these things.

925.a5: If the family suffers from such a dearth of relatives...the girl may single out of her own free choice any other citizen.

925.b3: ...so if a girl is hard put to find a husband among her compatriots...then if the man is related to her, he should enter into the estate under the provisions of the law.

Epinomis

974.c3: In these circumstances, isn't our difficulty about wisdom entirely appropriate, and our investigation as well?

Letters

313.d6: It was quite proper of you to send Archedemus to me; do likewise in the future, for when he reaches you and gives you my answers you may still have difficulties.

343.c4: ...and thus make it easy to refute by sense perception anything that may be said or pointed out, and fills everyone, so to speak, with perplexity and confusion.

344.c3: For this reason anyone who is seriously studying high matters will be the last to write about them and thus expose his thought to the envy and criticism of men.

352.e2: On the other hand, a policy that would benefit all concerned, friends and foes alike, or do as little harm as possible to both--this is not easy to see nor to carry out when it is seen.

353.a5: ...a family that your ancestors put in power at a time when they were in the direst peril and there was imminent danger that all of Hellenic Sicily would be overrun by the Carthaginians and become barbarian territory.