On the Concept of Non-Begetting
(tentative reflections)

Somewhere around 1985–I forget the exact date–a good friend and I had a series of impromptu discussions revolving around the central theme of the Book of Ecclesiastes, "vanity of vanity, all is vanity." Since that was almost twenty-five years ago, I am unsure as to what had initiated our dialogue or the exact context of our exchanges. Despite the significant time lapse, I recall our conversations with great pleasure because they led to a number of interesting offshoots which we continue to pursue off and on. For the latest example, I got into the philosophy of Schopenhauer which otherwise never would have interested me. Recently I came across a document archived on my computer containing an outline of our reflections which prompted me a re-examination and to see if any insights–so meaningful at the time–might be relevant now. In a sense, it was like opening a time capsule. By any standards, a lapse of almost a quarter century offers sufficient distance to reassess one's original insights. I do remain grateful to my friend for those discussions, for in the ensuring years they helped me to better appreciate the role of philosophy as related to theology...not just this but philosophy as situated within the context of lived spirituality. It should be noted that between the year 1985 and the present writing (toward the end 2008) the two of us revisited the topic of our discussion several times but nothing much came of it. Nevertheless, we agreed that we had hit upon something relevant. So without pursuing it further, I put the document back into the "time capsule" with the intent of re-visiting it later though hopefully much sooner...and that turned out to be now, the present essay.

The actual focus of our exchanges had centered around a term we coined at the time, "non-begetting." How this word came into being, God only knows; the impetus for formulating it is lost in obscurity despite our efforts at trying to reconstruct the details. I do remember that we spent quite a few months jotting down ideas and later submitting them to another person or two for feedback. This turned out to be embarrassing because the feedback revealed that the terminology was too abstract for the casual reader. I believe the current document is clearer though will require another revision or even shelving it altogether. Still, I decided to post it, offering these reflections for what they are worth. One of the two persons who reviewed it in '85 said something like, fine for you and your friend. What about the rest of us? Perhaps we were too enamored by the insight, at our cleverness at having come up with a new word. Later my friend remarked that we should have approached the subject with the intent of making it personal, of presenting it to a reader who didn't have the slightest clue about the word non-begetting. Following this approach would have enabled a reader to grasp better what we were trying to say instead of turning him or her off with abstract language. Also I recall that we were taking the negative feedback a bit too seriously; a more lightsome spirit would have helped to integrate better the corrections generously offered. Besides, if we were set on coining a new word with some significance, setbacks were inevitable. Admittedly at the time my friend and I were reluctant to see it that way. Still that didn't detract from the enjoyment we obtained throughout all this.

The only clear recollection I have is that ideas pertinent to non-begetting evolved from Ecclesiastes' cry of vanity. Another element of our discussions stands out, the ambivalent feeling most religions have towards the created realm, and that finds echos in Ecclesiastes as well. All religions are inclined to favor the invisible or spiritual realm as endowed with a greater reality than the stuff before our eyes, a tendency fraught with endless difficulties. Non-begetting grew out of this tension as lived within the nitty-gritty efforts at practicing the Christian life where everything directly or indirectly favors things spiritual which intimates that the natural world comes in second or at least is treated with a tinge of inconvenience. However, without the absolute reference offered by religion, life would be meaningless or in the context of this essay, life would be...well...just one act of begetting after another. If I recall correctly, my friend and I were struggling to articulate this tension more precisely while wishing to avoid conventional expressions, both theological and spiritual. In other words, we wanted to shun religious jargon. At the same time we were suspicious that non-begetting could smack of gnosticism which had dogged Christianity throughout its history. The term might not fit in with the traditional thought patterns and ways of looking at things you'd expect in a Christian context...in other words, people could take non-begetting as a gnostic concoction. Despite these misgivings–along with the realization that my friend and I were attempting to coin a different term–our efforts were intended originally for "private consumption" and not with a grandiose view of creating a new word for Webster's Dictionary.

Another factor which contributed to having opted for the term "non-begetting" was the general religious atmosphere during the mid 1980s. We had just come through a twenty year period of experimentation which commenced with the Second Vatican Council. That event had been in the back of our minds and remains so to the present, now some forty plus years afterwards. During that twenty year period many sincere Christians viewed the Council as an opportunity to experiment with various forms of meditation including Zen Buddhism and Transcendental Meditation. These interests stemmed in part from a dissatisfaction with the way traditional Christianity had expressed its message. People weren't abandoning ship wholesale but retained a genuine insight that a renewal in spirituality was in order. The material was there, tucked away in the corner of libraries and monasteries but few were accessing it, let alone aware that it existed. Once the initial flush and fervor of renewal had subsided, more recently it gave way to the advent of a new form of conservatism. Looking back on those days is a combination of joy and pain coupled with anxiety as to where we were going. These trends—renewal followed by religious conservatism—thus gave an opportunity to see two different world views at work. Both did not dampen our desire to continue reflecting upon the significance of non-begetting and what that term may entail for future reflection.

The advantage of choosing a word with the prefix "non-" suggests a middle ground between two realities. Its intentional ambiguity allows for broader or more inclusive definitions, disconcerting for anyone accustomed to think in black and white categories. That includes most of us. Without a doubt, the most well known word containing this prefix is "non-violence." It isn't exactly the opposite of "violence" nor or of "peace." At the same time "non-" prefixed to "violence" allows for just enough association with this destructive human tendency to suggest the opposite state. Certainly "non-violence" has more appeal than "not-violence;" in fact, this latter expression makes little or no sense. The concept of non-violence derives much of its appeal through the subtle use of this quasi-negative prefix. People of all persuasions ascribe to non-violent movements regardless of race or religion. I did look up the term "non-violence" on the Internet and in several reference books, but it proved not to be helpful. I was more interested in tracking down the reason why the prefix "non-" is used and came up empty handed. One thing did stand out: many websites situate non-violence within the context of Eastern spirituality, a significant clue. The original intent for coining the word "non-begetting" doesn't seem to have been influenced from that direction, at least as memory serves me.

"Non-" accommodates the fully negative "not" but leans in the direction towards signifying a negation that is either partial or hasn't been fully achieved, living as it does in a kind of no-man's land. Use of the verb "tends" is intentional, for it signifies moving towards a goal and thus keeps in line with the ambiguity of this prefix. You could say that "non-" is less emphatic than an outright "not." This prefix puts us on guard and can make us suspicious—even downright uncomfortable—because we lack clear-cut insight into the word it modifies. Our innate tendency is to prefer clearly defined concepts; "non-" is a nebulous word existing somewhere out there and requires bringing it down to earth. Perhaps such ambiguity made it impossible for opponents to squelch movements following the doctrine of non-violence; a clearly defined enemy would have been much easier to defeat. One only has to recall Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. Certainly these two notable practitioners of non-violence had an insight which confounded their opponents and brought about lasting changes in society. As for the word non-begetting...I hesitate to compare it with these lofty examples...but see a parallel with non-violence insofar that both terms signify withdraw from outright confrontation with an opponent. Like its famous counterpart of non-violence, non-begetting does not relate directly to the continuous coming into birth and passing out of existence so much a part of Ecclesiastes' cry of vanity. Instead, it lies in-between that sphere and the "place" from which it had come...and that "place" is an inaccessible mystery.

It's one thing to have come up with a concept intended for private consumption but quite another to make it comprehensible to a wider audience. Naturally people ask that this novel concept offers a valid point of view. What strikes you immediately is the prefix non-; I noted this earlier, but it requires more fleshing-out. This ambiguous prefix sets the stage for something out of the ordinary, the unexpected. It has a unique ability for bridging gaps, for making comparisons between widely different realities we are accustomed to perceive in hard-and-fast categories. Even the hyphen gives the prefix a bit more distance from the term it modifies; it acts as a veritable neutral space between the prefix and noun's primary meaning. Furthermore, non- is a means by which a familiar reality is not referred to directly by its complete opposite. It takes the term to

which it is attached and throws it slightly out of context, just enough to catch our attention. This is not unlike looking at an object during the night from the corner of your eyes as opposed to directly beholding it. Only an indirect angle of sight allows the object to come into view. In the case at hand, begetting is a term which drives from the experience of everyday life. Familiarity with one half of the picture (begetting), as it were, can lead to familiarity with the second half (non-begetting) even if our knowledge of this second half is tenuous at first.

As for "begetting," it seems better to employ the gerund "-ing" indicating that which is in a continuous state of development as opposed to a static entity, the case with many adjectives modifying nouns. The gerund may be applied to things within temporal duration ("begett*ing*") or things not affected by this all-pervasive medium (i.e., that which is "non-"). Thus begetting-as-gerund is a form derived from a verb but functions as a noun. On the other hand, "to beget" utilized as a verb is subject to the three temporal durations of past, present and future. Off hand I am unsure if there is an equivalent noun. "Begetter" may fall under this category as an agent who/which brings into existence or is responsible for a particular act. As for the agent engaged in the begetting, it may be personal or impersonal. For the purposes of this essay, I prefer the latter because it is more inclusive and keeps in line with the prefix non-. The matter is no of special issue for the moment though it does have special import; for now I wish to stress the fact that it relates to anything which comes into existence and passes out of it.

Use of the term begetting is generic and admittedly sounds a vague but signifies the all-inclusive reality of bringing to birth. Often we think of it as the result of martial union, the product of a male and female agent. Similarly, all our experiences come into existence–from where, we are not always sure–are sustained during their lifetimes (let's also include inanimate objects such as rocks, waterfalls, stars and so forth), can change into something else and eventually pass away or expire. In brief, people...all created things...are *begotten* which is a more technical word to indicate their definite origin and limitation as well as being produced by the male and female principles. They all ex-ist or literally, "stand out" from their source and remain secondary to this source. It is not the purpose of this essay to focus on the specific nature of this origin but to intimate it; the important point is that without exception all things, whether they be animate or inanimate, are begotten...are *being* begotten...almost swarm-like, to push this word further. Such is the primary insight from which all others flow. By focusing attention on the incipient action of begetting we can intuit the unknown source, that is, have an inkling of where all these things come. We have a natural desire to explore the source, but really to appreciate what begetting is all about and from where it sprung means that we should relinquish our curiosity. This is not a disingenuous way to avoid inquiry. The solution to our problem, if you will, will arise naturally, provided we stick with the discipline of seeing all things as begotten. If we give in to our curiosity, we'll get nowhere real fast.

There's a real joy in realizing that we, people around us and everything else are begotten, pure and simple, and not to behold it means we miss out on a lot. The perception arises prior to any mental or emotional baggage we add later on, no matter how immediate. Actually the insight of created beings as appearing magic-like on earth is liberating because it frees us up from compulsiveness and the tendency to explain them which conditioning and culture has put into our heads. At the same time the insight is terribly demanding because it...well, embraces everyone and everything, especially the one who perceives the begetting. Here's an example of how *not* to do it yet indicative of the way many of us think. How do you focus upon a rock which we claimed earlier is begotten, let alone a living human person? Do you sit in front of the rock and watch it being begotten? In addition to rocks, you have to include all the other people and stuff out there and extend it to two extremes of our perceptive ability reaching from sub-atomic particles to distant galaxies. A bit-far fetched but true. If we could, we'd love to embrace everything in one shot but in reality, cannot. Practically speaking, if we wish to see begetting at work, start off small and expand according to your ability. The gesture can apply either up from sub-atomic particles or down from the universe as a whole. Everything about us (including ourselves, of course) is being begotten within differing scales of time and space. You can't focus upon it continuously else you'd go crazy, like watching that rock being begotten. Always there remains tension between this general insight and the situations which life demands of us. You might commence with a grand feeling that "all is begotten," immediately fall into life's pressing concerns and then fall flat on your face. The problem is that begetting is so intense and comprehensive that we can't be in tune with an awareness of stuff

coming-to-birth all the time and in every place. Perhaps this is where faith helps. You have an experience of both begetting and non-begetting, stray away from attentiveness to either one yet retain past memories when your experience worked and project these memories into the present even when you're distracted or lack the strength to press on. After all, both principles are at work continuously, a comforting thought.

With regard to this problem of consistency in perception, Orthodox Christian tradition speaks of "prayer without ceasing" which is lifted from one of St. Paul's epistles. Easily these words are subject to misinterpretation. A danger exists of taking a traditional idea of prayer and applying it in a forced mental sort of way much like trying to watch a rock being begotten as mentioned above. Such prayer is an act of the will which fails to consider the more direct perceptive approach required to beholding the action of begetting. As for the original sense of this phrase, consider the Greek term *diapantos* which means both "without ceasing" and "always." It literally means "through-all." In other words, *diapantos* suggests an ability to perceive "through" (*dia*) things to what lies behind it. Not that it points to a realm hidden from non-initiates but abstracts from particulars to the two principles of male and female relative to begetting. A similar corollary to non-begetting exists which indirectly makes itself felt upon...through...the world of begetting while not partaking of it.

Because anything which exists obviously endures for a longer or shorter period of time, we could make a parallel between this overall temporal duration and Ecclesiastes' "vanity." There comes to mind the famous list of "times" in Chapter Three: "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under the heaven." The list continues through verse nine and covers every aspect of human existence. Thus begetting has its roots in time or duration and extends to all Ecclesiastes' "times." Note the pair of opposites which he presents:

-born/die
-plant/pluck
-kill/heal
-break down/build up
-weep/laugh
-mourn/dance
-cast away stones/gather stones
-embrace/refrain from embracing
-seek/lose
-keep/cast away
-rend/sew
-keep silence/speak
-love/hate
-war/peace

Towards the beginning of the Book of Ecclesiastes one verse sets the tone for these pairs of opposites and runs through all the "times:" "All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done" [1.8-9]. The key point are the three dimensions of time: "has been, "is" and "will be." The first part of the third sentence pertains to being in general and the second, most likely to anything fabricated or brought into existence by human means. Regardless of the source, Ecclesiastes intuits both pairs as the same. They have in common a certain blandness–a "weariness"–which in the original Hebrew implies tiredness resulting from labor (*yagah*). And so the Preacher gives classical expression to the familiar human response of dissatisfaction with the tedium of repetitive activity. For this reason the inferred opposite to "vanity" presupposes a standpoint not fully identified with temporal and spatial duration. Although he doesn't speak about it, we may posit this reality as a kind of non-begetting or middle ground between "vanity" and God. The Preacher does mention God but not as much as we'd expect in a biblical text. If we take a theological stance, this a-temporal vantage point is because we are made in the divine image and likeness. We may identify the image as our unbegotten, unchanging nature and likeness as our begotten nature which attempts to bring into line the former. However, this essay isn't focused upon theology, even though reference is made here to a familiar biblical idea in order to highlight the matter at hand.

The Preacher deals with the importance of beginnings which are of a different order than Genesis' familiar "In the beginning." There everything comes into existence at God's command, whereas Ecclesiastes speaks about individual or particular beginnings minus direct divine intervention. Furthermore, he does not treat the idea of an ending, the goal towards which any and all beginnings tend; more specifically, Ecclesiastes considers the "round and round" [1.6] nature of that familiar in-between land. Here is the arena between a beginning and an end in which we find ourselves and must get along as best as possible. A closer read of the text intimates despondency as opposed to outright despair at this in-between land–it is the realm of "vanity"–and offers no way out except general exhortations here and there about fearing God and keeping his commandments (cf. 12.13). Not very encouraging but notable by reason as an afterthought. Nevertheless, the Book of Ecclesiastes is a must-read for a proper grasp of begetting in order to prep us for the transition to non-begetting.

One can compare Ecclesiastes' sullen observations about the fleeting nature of life with Wisdom in Proverbs crying out, "Does not wisdom call, does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights beside the way, in the paths she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud" [8.1-3]. The verses which follow spell out an alternative to activities and situations in which people find themselves caught or blinded by an ignorance that makes them exclaim with the Preacher that everything is begotten/"vain." What we see in both Ecclesiastes and Wisdom (also consider the beginning of Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon, texts in the Septuagint) is a detached though concerned position from human intercourse. This position is necessary for the intent of summoning people to turn aside from the folly of begetting or treating things as though they had permanent value. The same applies with the term "non-begetting." You have to stand outside the reality of begetting to see it in operation but in essence never you can achieve it fully in this life, another reason for the prefix "non-."

One advantage of the Book of Ecclesiastes compared with other biblical books is its philosophical character taken from first-hand observations and avoidance of a strictly theological posture. It has little if any reference to God which makes it attractive to compare with the concept of non-begetting. Ecclesiastes does this more by indirect inference than by offering specific details. The fundamental battle-cry of his book is the well known "vanity" or in Hebrew, *hevel*, whose fundamental meaning is breath or breathing. It pertains to exhalation (i.e., air), something which can't be apprehended and disappears as soon as we grasp it. Thus Ecclesiastes' reflections oblige us to look at the created realm from this ephemeral vantage point while avoiding speculation as to its cause. That is the task of Proverbs and more specifically, the Song of Songs. As for these latter two books relative to the first, patristic authors of the early Christian centuries such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa drew up a three-fold plan which treated the spiritual life based upon the insights of Philo of Alexandria and earlier Greek philosophers. This theory boils down to an account of the spiritual life as purgative, illuminative and unitive, or to put it in active verbs, "to cleanse," "impart light" and "make one." These three divisions were assigned to the three books of the Old Testament: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. It was Origen who laid out this three-fold path which was modified slightly by other Christian authors such as Gregory of Nyssa. However, these modifications are not essential to this essay. For an outline, consider the brief observation taken from Gregory's **Song Commentary**: "The purpose of the book of Proverbs is to teach, while that of Ecclesiastes is to preach. The philosophy of the Song of Songs transcends both by its loftier doctrine."

Creation is the basis–the absolute foundation–for positing an analogy between its concreteness and that which lays outside its domain. We have no reliable way to verify if anything does lie outside creation, so theories in this regard are fraught with uncertainty and even suspicion. The characteristics of begetting–of coming into birth and passing out of existence–form an umbrella term for reality. Therefore they comprise the starting point for making analogies and metaphors about this unknown realm. As we have observed, some undeniable thing within us intuits the existence of an entity altogether different from what is before our senses. Despite evidence against this position (for example, from the scientific point of view), we cling to it like nothing else. And so it parallels what we've posited as the realm of non-begetting which equally is an unseen reality. While non-begetting may not be Ultimate Reality in and by itself, we could call it the first manifestation of this reality. At the same time making a claim as to the existence of non-begetting rests upon analogies taken from begotten-ness and its opposite, dissolution, but with an eye towards intuiting something different from them.

Here's the first and most important step, making a clear line of demarcation between two different realities. It thus suggests an alternative enabling us to examine in indirect fashion that hard-to-grasp vantage point which intuits the fleetingness of creation.

Even to adopt a position that something exists which is not subject to begotten-ness and hence "not vain" goes against the grain of common sense. All you have to do is look at the evidence around you, for all things are subject to the cycle of birth and death. Despite repeated efforts at disproving a tenuous transcendent realm, people persevere in belief of immaterial existence usually expressed through religious or philosophical terminology. Even the juxtaposition between the world of begetting/"vanity" and the one who is perceiving it is sufficient evidence to probe further into this mysterious pair of opposites. It just may be that the perceiver lays sufficiently outside the world of coming into and passing out of existence as we know it; maybe not fully outside but outside enough not to be identified with it totally. We saw this with Ecclesiastes and his philosophical stance which is tinged by pessimism but a pessimism garnered from personal experience. Moreover, he was gifted with the power of persuasion (the ancients called it rhetoric) which aroused in his readers a desire to adopt his view. He starts out by describing "vanity" as the bounded nature of creation or more precisely, our inordinate attempts at controlling it.

Such control is a form of self-expression where the self flourishes, grows and achieves an incarnation which embodies those things it has appropriated. The means of self-expression are numerous: biological (propagation of the species), practical (or artistic), social (or political), intellectual and spiritual or (trans-personal). Each stage is related to the other hierarchically, always the higher containing the lower. They form a ladder upon which a person may communicate himself freely, grow, expand or engage in a variety of other meaningful activities. Society has numerous ways both to recognize and to affirm these stages, the most obvious of which is marriage. Through society's formal recognition of marriage, a person is empowered to beget children on a biological level, thereby partaking either of the paternal or maternal role. Yet begetting isn't confined to solely this plane. It is the foundational image for examining the various ways people seek to prolong or indefinitely expand themselves into an equally indefinite future. This restless, future-oriented drive is best viewed as assuming a linear direction. It starts or is "begotten" from a specific point with the intent of projecting one's biological existence into an indefinite future. Here exists a temptation to substitute that which is indefinite for that which unlimited. At this juncture "vanity" most genuinely comes into play with respect to the notion of begetting; the latter is well and good in itself. Only our misuse of it is subject to "vanity."

Begetting ties in with another concept dear to us moderns, progress. We've come to take for granted that human endeavors began at a given point and proceed to a goal, albeit fuzzy, with each step along the way supposedly being a better one. Religion had a role to play with giving birth to this insight, but today is generally absent. It was easy in past times to posit the end result as God; now various terms borrowed from science are used which preclude explicit divine dimension. Actually, the notion of an end is just as mysterious as a beginning. It's sufficiently alive to motivate people or make them fulfilled, but when you look at it more closely, is it a human invention just like the idea of a beginning? Obviously it's a question no one can answer. Still, an idea of beginning implies an end and visa versa. Maybe this conundrum can be resolved by realizing that it does fall within the sphere of begetting/"vanity." This alone is enough to spur one to seek an alternative.

A more specific element we can attribute to begetting is weariness over the give and take of everyday human existence with its unending rounds of birth and death, not to mention responsibilities laid upon us as we go through life. Here is the heart of Ecclesiastes' discourse. At this juncture it may be helpful to briefly outline the key elements from Chapter One which relate to "vanity:"

-what does man *gain* by toil
-a generation *goes*, a generation *comes*
-the sun *rises* and sun *goes* down
-the wind *blows*...round and round
-streams *run* to the sea
-all things *are full* of weariness

-the eye *not satisfied* with seeing; the ear *is not filled* with hearing
-what *has been* is what *will be*
-*nothing new* under the sun
-something new *has been* already
-*no remembrance* of former things or of later things

Readily we could substitute "begetting" for many if not all these italicized words, but that would be placing this insight on the same plane as Ecclesiastes' observations which have a negative tone about them. Certainly begetting has positive connotations, otherwise there would be no people, plants, animals and the like. However, for some reason or other we are more attracted to negative elements as opposed to positive ones...perhaps for some unconscious urge to get drama out of life. In the human sphere begetting can imply a compulsive preoccupation with self-expansion resulting in weariness due to the demands it lays upon a person. This is especially true in modern societies where a person is expected to produce, the measure of his or her success. Usually the demands are not assumed freely but imposed. Such imposition gives rise to fatigue at always having to produce...to beget...yet it can be a blessing in disguise. In the final analysis, begetting so exhausts a person with generating all sorts of activity that a mind so caught up must relax, even collapse from exhaustion. Once we achieve such rest or have it thrust upon us, we have a chance to stand back and become aware that the restless activity of begetting is circumscribed by limitations. Constantly we are balking and trying to break out of them while remaining subject to the temptation to see our efforts at liberation in terms of further begetting. In other words, it is more of the same (á la Ecclesiastes), a trap to which we succumb easily. Fatigue has another positive value. It enables a person to perceive a dimension to reality which normally would not have been visible amid the usual wear and tear of begetting's activity. This is not to claim that begetting is inherently wrong, an important point to keep in mind. Refer to Ecclesiastes' treatment of the created realm; he sees it as good in itself while he singles out the repetitive nature of coming into and passing from existence as mirroring human "vanity." Despite its affirmative aspects, begetting really becomes complex when viewed through our attachments. That's the area of concern, where we must seek an antidote as with the concept of non-begetting.

How does a person come to realize the existence of a hitherto unknown reality independent of the familiar spacial-temporal plane which is the domain of begetting? Recall that the prefix "non-" signifies a state which does not imply fully the opposite of the noun to which it is attached. It lacks specificity and introduces an element of intentional ambiguity. Therefore non-begetting intimates a reality transcending the distinction between entities which are either overtly positive or negative. In the case at hand this would be "begetting" and "un-begetting." Obviously the latter signifies voluntary or involuntary restraint concerning the inability to procreate. As far as this essay goes, "un-begetting" is not the goal towards which we are striving. A person can start out from Ecclesiastes' point of view ("vanity") and work backwards until he or she hits upon that which is doing the perceiving and discover the source whence it came. Already we mentioned this critical first step. Closer consideration reveals that it's an easier gesture than at first glance; nothing mysterious is involved, only overcoming our unfamiliarity with the process. Yet the mystery lies as to the exact nature of begetting's source. Actually our unfamiliarity indicates how much we are caught up in the world of begetting. When you perceive the difference between everything which is begotten and that mysterious spectator-like part of us engaged in the observing process, you don't simply walk around and say "This is begetting" and "I am that which perceives the begetting." If you do, quickly you'll get into trouble. An insight's usefulness becomes so compelling that immediately it is transformed into an attachment you want everyone else to accept. It is an easy attitude to recognize in other persons but hard in ourselves, for the proclivity to dogmatize is present more than we'd like to admit. Time is required absorb the difference between the two spheres before we become adept at shifting attention from begetting to non-begetting. The concept of non-begetting is new, a means to shed light upon an old distinction or that which is created and not created. It requires serious questioning with regards to one's whole way of life because actual practice is the issue at hand. Surely ascribing to non-begetting affects behavior and therefore the realm of morality. However, this is not the explicit theme of the essay; that can form a theme all by itself. For the moment we want to get at non-begetting as straight-forward as possible and make it accessible. Then we can take it a step or two further.

So here we find ourselves at a junction: one road leads off to begetting and the other to non-begetting. The

latter enfolds the former by reason of it not being subject to the birth/death process but standing at the very point where this process becomes manifest. Admittedly this is quite difficult to articulate since the manifestation comes on us so quickly. Going on the classical principle that anything invisible is prior or superior to that which is not visible, we presume that non-begetting enfolds begetting. There is no objective evidence for this stance, yet the history of religions throughout the world indicate that we humans have this inbuilt tendency. Since we have two terms for two experiences, the next logical insight is that a hiatus must exist between them. It might be better to use this term as opposed to "gap," the latter intimating two completely unbridgeable realities. A hiatus can be associated not only with a spacial difference but a temporal one, the latter being more relevant because time is required for anything to impact our awareness after it had happened. Thus we infer a certain disjunction as opposed to an outright contrast. Although we can't tack anything familiar into our experience of non-begetting, the very fact that our cognition is delayed or held in abeyance...and therefore passes into the realm of "non-"...is reason to posit the likelihood of perceiving reality through use of the term non-begetting. A hiatus creates a mode of expectancy, a slight pause in the passage of time which effects a disjunction. This is quite unlike instances when we're caught up in the world of begetting and see no way out of our predicament of boundedness.

Non-begetting is totally free from the need of self-expression, guilt produced by failure and the disquiet that can arise from accountability to a higher authority, all characteristics proper to the negative side of begetting. In other words, non-begetting is a temporal: it is free to be present not only in the present but in the past (origin) or future (intended goal). It is also free from the notion of progress, that familiar modern way of viewing everything which can devalue the value of the present moment. Yet if we consider non-begetting after a quick read of the Book of Ecclesiastes which focuses upon that endless "round and round" cycle [1.6], we could misidentify the former's timelessness as equivalent to the latter's boundedness. This is a classic example when categories are confused due to partial similarity.

Another way to see if the term non-begetting has any validity is through personal experimentation simply because we can't prove its existence to anyone else. Even the entertaining notion of proving its reality falls outside non-begetting since it exists prior to all manner of proofs. The action of play is one of the best ways to approximate how we can intuit non-begetting because it is flexible and representative of a lightsome spirit. If the results don't turn out to be as you expect, that's fine; there's plenty of time to follow another lead and see where that ends up. This is one of the chief insights I realized after reconsidering non-begetting back around 1985 when I had performed a simple experiment. Around that time I had taken a walk in the woods not far from my residence. I was familiar with the territory yet went out with the vague intent of getting more insight into non-begetting. Part of this territory contains several trails, one of which was an old fire road which passed two small streams converging just south of the path. I had intended to bypass this area and come out to a large stream which flowed into a lake. The season was late September just when the foliage was turning bright colors. Since the sky threatened rain, I decided not to venture far off the beaten path. However, the weather improved, and I opted to sit on a ledge above the point where the two streams converge. Suddenly this familiar area was transformed by the gurgling sound of the nearby streams. Such a sound is symbolic of much what we like to think of nature: pristine and untouched by human intervention. Then the sound seemed to merge with the scenery, as though the sound and sights had become harmonized. I was aware of the distinction of rocks, trees and streams yet simultaneously aware of the sameness of them all. What brought this about? First, comes the familiarity of natural surroundings. Second, the possibility that any combination of perceptions—in this instance sound and sight, the senses we rely upon most heavily—can coalesce and produce new perceptions, thereby opening whole a world which previously lay hidden.

It is easy to see how this perception of unity engendered by the sound of a brook in a lovely pastoral scene offers material for all sorts of poetic images and religious enlightenment. After all, being out there frees you from human interaction so you're nothing bothered by anyone. Such is the nature of a laboratory, artificial but necessary to optimize conditions before experimentation in the field. Nevertheless, it's important to cultivate such an environment in order to transpose it to another place, especially less favorable ones. These places are best suited to test our insight though the practice isn't advisable when starting out. Nature offered a bottom line, the raw material from which all insights are built. The problem was how to articulate the unity perceived out there. Every aspect of the natural world was outside me yet I was part and parcel of it. I could have

examined each aspect and situated them within a spiritual reality; you might expect this when alone in a quiet place. Still, adopting a religious insight would smack of a particular world view...fine...but subject to modes of expression proper to religion. And so with a desire to get at what was transpiring in the woods, I searched for a term or phrase embracing its reality yet bespeaking a more comprehensive quality with which a larger audience could identify. At the same time I wished to avoid getting too abstract from the natural world, of accommodating as many points of view as possible. After all, what is the common denominator of "all this stuff" which includes the person who is perceiving it?

There's a term common to Buddhism called "suchness" which helps out here. From what I gather (and this is an unprofessional observation), it applies to an immediate perception of physical reality just as it is..."such" as it is...minus embellishments we're fond of attaching to it. Practitioners are relentless at pointing out suchness in and through every circumstance. In theory this is easy because all we have at our disposal are perceptions. Practice is something else. Should a person insist that we must order these perceptions, the further he or she gets from suchness. This desire for order is so ingrained that we're prone to claim it is just as important as our perceptions, if not more so. If pressed further, suchness would be dismissed as a useless because it doesn't lead anywhere, going round and round like Ecclesiastes' observations.

One of the best ways of getting a handle on non-begetting is the contemplation of death, the absolute terminus of every form of bringing-into-existence, that is, of begetting. Not that we're trying to induce physical death nor be morbidly obsessive about it, but see if we can simulate its process. The unconditional nature of death compels us like no other reality to undertake the simulation. Real physical death brings to an end everything which is begotten, so much so that despite all the talk about what may or may come afterwards, nobody knows until we undergo it. We hear that God is infinite and unknowable, two perceptions about the divinity which equally are applicable to death. To put such abstract observations more concretely, how do we imitate something absolute when all our experience is reducible to begetting, the opposite of that which is absolute? We can start by considering the actual dying process, a shutting down of our minds and bodies...in short, how it brings to a halt anything in ourselves that moves. This is not as strange as it sounds; it is a spiritual discipline common to some of world's great religions. As these practices testify, inducing mortification as far as possible does not produce morbidness but joy, a joy so profound it cannot be expressed adequately. Though we may fall back into regular habits, we've gotten an inkling into the greatest mystery of all.

The way of going about this is to start by sitting as still as possible (this imitates rigor mortis). Being faithful to the initial practice inevitably leads to the more important aspects of mortification. Physical stillness is crucial; automatically it spills over to our minds and works on settling down thoughts and the imagination. This is one of those things hard to explain but really does work. Once more the emphasis is on practical experience. Upon having "died" for a period of time and then having come back to "life," almost automatically we have a need to access religious/philosophical terminology. Words from other areas of human experience don't measure up. On the other hand, non-begetting can offer perspective here though it is not intended to replace conventional religious terminology, only as alternate to help explain the practice of mortification. The mock dying experiment, as a direct means to experience the distinction between begetting and non-begetting, replicates everything involved in the actual process. The major exception, of course, is pain and suffering.

At this juncture we can turn attention to Hans Vaihinger's theory of "as if" dealt more fully in another essay on this same Home Page. The reason? He presents a way out of the mess we usually find ourselves in when it comes to things both moral and spiritual...not a panacea but that an alternative to our muddled way of looking at things does exist. "As if" is a tool; like all tools, it is limited yet has beneficial effects should we make use of it. Let's start with a perception so many people have about themselves: "I feel *as if* I were absolutely of no value to anyone." A bit desperate, but we're attempting to stick to human reality as best as possible. What pops out in this statement about oneself? Neither the "I" nor the feeling of uselessness but the Vaihingerian "as if." These two particles make a bridge between the person and his or her sentiment with something external and symbolic of present self-awareness. Here we have a common technique often not reflected upon yet once we access it, these two small particles have the potential of opening up new insights. We say "as if" automatically—make a consciously false statement—and one therefore that is a fiction. Although we're conscious that it is a fiction, unconsciously we take an "as if" as a hypothesis we can prove by experimentation with

verification being the result. In the case at hand, we feel so consistently valueless that it evolves into an operating principle, a hypothesis. Another example is when a person says, "While on retreat in a monastery I feel *as if* I were living in the Middle Ages." Everything about us is suggestive of this historical period which means familiarity with it. By becoming aware of the Middle Ages as a fiction, we externalize it and verify it through real accounts from that epoch. This is not unlike acting where the actor knows the distinction between his or her identity and the role which is being played out. A problem would arise when a person feeling "as if" he or she were in the Middle Ages believed that it was true, the realm of delusion which denies present reality.

Hans Vaihinger offers two illustrations of "as if" which fill out the point we're trying to get at with this example. The first applies to the concept of an atom. I don't know if scientists today can see certain atoms through high-powered microscopes, but they can detect their presence. This is irrelevant for our purposes. Around the turn of the twentieth century when Vaihinger was formulating his ideas, atomic theory was starting to seep down to general public awareness. At the time he proposed that science behave *as if* the world were composed of atoms even though nobody has seen them. The other example pertains to jurisprudence. Take a rich man who has willed a million dollars to his son who later has an accident and ends up brain dead. Here law treats the son *as if* he were dead and can't inherit the million bucks. Vaihinger gets into commonly accepted terms such as "freedom" which he considers a useful fiction. Although it isn't with the scope of this essay to debate the full scope of his idea, still it's intriguing to adopt the "as if" stance. It's not unlike play which seems closely allied with fiction.

Now let's make a practical application. We "die" according to the process noted above with regard to simulation of real physical death and later come back to "life." The quotation marks, of course, indicate that this practice isn't in accord with the real thing but simulates it to some degree. In fact, the best parallel between true physical death and the simulation of it comes about by shutting down our faculties. Putting this into Vaihingerian terms, our simulation allows us to act *as if* we were dead. In reality we don't die nor do we come back to life because we had been alive throughout. Our experiment is a fictive device: death is feigned instead of being an actual fact; life is actual but our departure from it is feigned. This is not entirely unlike a description of acting. It may be more to the point to say that we return from "death" to life in accord with the fictive as-if pattern, for that is the original state from which we had started. Being alive is so general and inclusive that moving from it to an all-inclusive condition (physical death as in our simulation) is not possible unless we pass away physically. This shows the incomparability of both life and death, their inability to be simulated in an absolute sense since nothing can stand outside them. The problem is also applicable to artificial intelligence which seeks to replicate the human brain. The brain is so complex that the only analog to it is the brain *per se*. As for death, closer examination reveals that we don't really know about it except second hand as when we read about death and see actual dead bodies. When we're looking at dead bodies we know we are not like them but are in the opposite state, life.

Always there exists the temptation to perceive non-begetting as an ideal towards which to strive. This is inaccurate because non-begetting is the ground from which we behold begetting. In other words, you can't stand outside that which embraces everything and strive after it. Instead of falling short of an ideal as conventionally understood, the all-pervasive character of non-begetting offers continuous opportunities of attuning us with the limited sphere of the begotten world even if this sphere is as boundless as the universe. Comprehension of non-begetting reduces the enormity of begetting's complexity into small units through a fictive leap of the imagination. It allows us to re-assemble them in a way other than a head-on attempt to grasp every feature of the world of begetting which would drive us crazy. This isn't a reduction of complexity to simplicity but a two-step intuition. First, we grasp the lowest common denominator of creation (begetting) and second, employ a new term (non-begetting) to reveal how the perceiver isn't affected by the processes of creation. The person stands outside creation and beholds it, all this while remaining right in the thick of createdness. Another way of putting it: if we adopt the position of non-begetting or that-which-is-perceiving the world of begetting—in our description of it we would view the world *as if* it were situated within the larger reality of non-begetting. We would act *as if* such and such a thing were so in its relation to non-begetting. Most likely Hans Vaihinger would subscribe to the fact that even though the insight of non-begetting is helpful, it has no basis in reality. It is a product of our imagination but is geared to improving the quality of our lives.

These observations about our new term sound well and good, but we need to flesh them out through the analogical process. Such is a by-product of the Vaihingerian as-if particles; they compel us to make comparisons between what we know fully and that which we know in part or don't know at all. We can fabricate an endless source of analogies related to the created realm or even with regard to things philosophical or theological, but the task is more daunting when we come to the unfamiliar nature of non-begetting. The question is, if you can identify begetting...coming into birth...as something palpable to all the senses, how can you identify something completely alien to it? Is non-begetting a product of our imagination? What role have the analogies in mediating between such disparate realities? The term "witness" helps somewhat; someone has to know about non-begetting and be persuasive in order to pass it on to another person. This implies sensitivity with regards to one's audience which is wholly unfamiliar with this new term. It's also prudent to avoid speaking about categories as much as possible which give rise to further categories down the line. This is helps because categories show how we have been brought up, the language we speak, plus the philosophic and religious beliefs we maintain. You have to start off with an awareness that categorical thinking is central to most people even if they not consciously aware of its operation in their lives. Thus a descriptive, open-ended approach to non-begetting is of service because it is more adapted to face questions and challenges that will come our way. For this reason Vaihinger's as-if is an approach accessible to most people since they use them on a daily basis without really being aware of their significance or potential.

Some features are common to Ecclesiastes' vanity and begetting, so we can say that Ecclesiastes' "vanity" is *like* begetting. This is in reference to verbs from the text above which have the verbs in italics. Should we shift from "vanity" to that-which-is-observing it, we come to a realm where we have to grope around for adequate analogies and metaphors in order to get a handle on its ambiguity. The ground on which we are standing is not stable, for the natural sequence of this process leads to something akin to, "the incomprehensible observer of vanity (begetting) is *like*..." From this point on we are in terra incognita. No one knows for sure what this beholder of vanity/begetting resembles. Language is insufficient, so we have to keep in mind the principle enunciated above: our sensations alone are real as opposed to the categories we utilize for getting around in the world. We can follow this basic principle in our slow but methodical transition from begetting to that-which-is-not it. This is where the prefix "non-" comes into play. Since "non-" intimates an in-between reality–"non-" creates a hiatus as opposed to a gap–it is useful for making the transition, to transfer stuff ascertained by our sensations while gently leaving aside perceptions built upon them. It is best to avoid use of "like" which makes a more direct correspondence between two things. A simple example is, "Mary is *like* an angel, she's so sweet" (This would be different from saying, "Mary behaves *as if* she were an angel, she's so sweet"...less clear and more elusive). Thus we prefix "non-" to begetting (vanity) and create an intentional hiatus (-), i.e., non-begetting. This gesture results in not the transformation of begetting but making it undergo a disjuncture, a slight un-alignment, which incorporates the reality of begetting with that-which-is-perceiving it.

The newly postulated fictive realm of non-begetting isn't isolated from its counterpart giving us license to forsake all that which is in the process of coming to birth. That would be delusional at worst and gnostic at best. However, we may feel tempted to adopt a form of gnosticism by claiming that non-begetting is far superior to begetting. Therefore we're obliged to do everything within our power to minimize whatever comes to birth. If that's the case, gnosticism posits a gap instead of a hiatus. A true appreciation of non-begetting makes no gap with its created counterpart; both are appropriate in any situation. Such an intent is a *gesture* (this word is preferable over "process" or "method" which smack of a technique) from begetting to the perceiver of it and finally over to non-begetting. The three form a seamless whole but do not seem that way when we're starting out; obviously some practice is needed as we go along. Once non-begetting is developed into a hypothesis, it can stabilize our perceptions and make them normative for application with respect to the world of begetting/"vanity." The world isn't changed in the least, just our way of looking at it. Still a danger is present: according to Vaihinger, a hypothesis (it takes its root in a fiction) which seems valid can be endorsed with great enthusiasm. Everyone should...*must*...look at the world in this particular way. Chances are this wouldn't happen, but it illustrates the next step is about to be taken–a degeneration of fiction/hypothesis–into what Vaihinger calls dogma. In the context at hand, dogma may be described briefly in a statement running something like, "Because non-begetting is of a higher plane than begetting, you *must* acknowledge it as so."

Dogmas have a way to satisfy without critical examination. It is the final product of the fiction-to-hypothesis development of non-begetting which gradually becomes reified and leads to crystallization. This rigidity can lead to one step further, namely, when an insight transformed into a dogma is transmuted into a *because*. This is an order radically different from the world of "as if." The conjunction "because" is closely akin to "for that reason." It presents a straight-forward way of doing things with little or no deviation...almost like the unalterable laws of causality. Here are two common examples: 1) "a young man joins the army *because* he wants to be a soldier." 2) "She goes to college *because* she wants to earn a degree." Certainly both are straight, forward statements representing the opposite to the Vaihingerian "as if."

"Because" isn't necessarily hostile to "as if" but deals with matter-of-fact statements and injunctions required to perform a task or to conduct oneself in a certain manner. While helpful, it isn't that creative and is subject to assuming an authoritarian air. Also a problem arises should the particles "as if" become unduly familiar. People can get excited over a new discovery these terms open up and imperceptibly turn it from a fiction (bypassing the hypothesis stage) until it achieves final crystallization as a dogma. Should we take non-begetting as a dogma, we would go around and tell people something like, "Here is what non-begetting is all about. It is the only reality to which you must subscribe." A dogmatic stance provides comfort and assurance which is fine for an individual. We invite trouble when we force it down the throats of other persons as categories which have become hardened and must be enforced. We can put this in two ways with respect to the two terms, begetting and non-begetting. "Because" makes both dull and uninteresting; it presupposes a form of categorical expression and conveys an attitude that we're intent upon teaching them. It would be more interesting...fun...to introduce "as if:" "The world looks *as if* it were subject to begetting." And, "There is a way of looking at things which enables us to perceive the world *as if* it were subject to non-begetting."

It seems that many creative insights have an air of "as if" about them; just consider personal experience because we employ them frequently. They are not fully stable nor do we intend them to hang around indefinitely because they are subject to constant modification and renewal. Thus "as if" has a feel of open-endedness about it. Once this device has performed its task, we adapt the appropriate insight and move on from there which is in tune with Vaihinger's observations. So in order to prevent non-begetting from sliding into a dogma, always we need to keep in mind the element of play. Since it and the sphere of begetting often are at odds with each other, to insert the former into the latter is a kind of "as if" gesture. Take an example. We can envision ourselves *as if* we had just landed on earth from another planet. We step outside our spaceships and watch the curious two-legged mammals walking about, mammals being defined as those who suckle their young. These beings are subject to every imaginable form of begetting and don't even realize it. Our novelty at beholding them remains as long as we don't subject ourselves to such mammalian behavior but retain our identity as alien beings, i.e., rooted in the sphere of non-begetting. Obviously a play of the imagination, but it's intended to make the point more vivid. This fanciful gesture of non-begetting prevents our minds from becoming locked within the confines of our own ideas which little by little enervate our ability to function. It is therefore a type of enlightenment but one which requires constant vigilance to remain fresh. Now the contradictions so familiar in daily life gradually become transformed into driving forces that they may reveal the action of non-begetting. After all, only our perceptions are real; what we make of them is up to us, whether to act "as if" they suggested another reality or "because" they are indicative of this other reality. The fictive process is personal and purely subjective. Yet it can be confirmed by the experience of other persons and use any hypotheses which result from its exercise through those services it renders.

One way of summing up this essay is by referring to the title, "*On* the Concept of Non-Begetting." Here I italicize the word "on" implying the fact that the reflections just presented are incomplete and subject to further revision. Furthermore, there's a certain disjunction between some of the paragraphs that requires tying them closer together. As for the subtitle ("tentative reflections"), more work is needed to see how non-begetting ties in with those derived from Hans Vaihinger's fictive device represented by the particles "as if." Several months before offering this revision I was in a library stack room returning a book. Suddenly a volume from a musty series entitled something like Classics of Western Thought literally fell on my head from the topmost shelf. It contained excerpts from the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Being somewhat superstitious...as if (Vaihinger!) were a good omen...I opened it up and read a bit. I came away impressed by the way he expressed himself, quite unlike what you'd expect from a stuffy ol' German philosopher. This

"happy fault" led to getting a book about his philosophy so I could understand it better. The next step was a read of his formidable sounding work, **The World as Will and Representation** (currently I'm about one quarter through the first of two volumes). There I found Schopenhauer's concept of "will" somewhat akin to non-begetting, so hopefully with his assistance I can take some of the insights offered in this essay and bring them a step forward.

Clearly this second form of the document (late 2008) is an unprofessional exposition. That's okay for now but not so for the future. The sense of incompleteness should lead to further reflection, again, with Schopenhauer's help. As I noted in the opening paragraph, non-begetting came into existence back in 1985 because it seemed a helpful at the time. Perhaps another twenty years of reflection is needed though I hope not to wait so long. If not, I can apply to this essay the advice Schopenhauer gave in his Preface to the First Edition to anyone who wishes not to read it, "It can, like many another, fill a gap in his library, where, neatly bound, it is sure to look well. Or he can lay it on the dressing-table or tea-table of his learned lady friend." Regardless, what's needed between now and any future revision is to go out and practice it...and continue along with Schopenhauer.