

## To Have or Not to Have Expectations

Every time we access the news in whatever format that happens to be, we get the same depressing reports about violence whether foreign or domestic. It has become so commonplace that barely we give it a thought. The only difference is whether or not it's gorier than the previous incident. This is so well documented and unfortunately accepted that we've become jaded and tune it out simply in order to get on with our own lives. Our existence is chaotic enough and doesn't need to be burdened further. We realize this but given the ubiquity of mobile devices, seldom are we able to keep unwanted influences at bay. Although on occasion we may be drawn to discuss a tragedy with some friends, more often than not it's better to let it go and move on. This is harder to accomplish than at first thought because an incident from the remotest part of the world is thrust into our faces immediately and with great vividness. The violence appears more widespread than it may be in actuality. Nevertheless, it's out there and conspires to make us paranoid not all at once but little by little. Sometimes you get the impression that someone...something...is overseeing all this and is responsible for it all, working in secret for our demise. A conspiracy theory? Who knows, though sometimes you can't help but think along those lines.

The relatively new phenomenon of continuous background violence that has come more to the fore after 9-11 colors a lot of our expectations, of what we want in life and how we go about getting it. I say 9-11 because that act of domestic terrorism brought violence home in a way we haven't experienced before. Yes, we had the Oklahoma City bombing, but that wasn't tinged by Islamic religious extremism, making 9-11 more alien and threatening than anything on the domestic front. Since that national tragedy some years back our normal expectations stand on shakier ground even though statistically speaking we won't be caught up in a terror-inspired event.

Then there are the lesser acts of violence, the run-of-the-mill variety, which impact us daily whether by action, intention or by just thinking about it. We can group them pretty much together into one expectation or more precisely, a hope that all negativity will be expelled from our lives. This is a potential of remote fulfillment—and people are working earnestly toward that end—yet it has a smack of utopia. The challenge posed by violence is real in that the expectations draw out what's noblest in human nature and whimsical in that our responses can be no more than wishful thinking to be fulfilled only in our dreams.

Set off and against these various hopes and fears is the expectation of something better than what we have now, even if our situation is fairly well off. Could this be the

same as hope? Hope is supposed to be a theological virtue tied in with faith and love; traditionally it's situated in between them, but when you're practicing them as best you can, you're not concerned with the order. You're focused more on the landscape than on the map. With this in mind, it seems best to leave any talk about contrasting expectations and hope out of the picture for now. Perhaps at a later point it could be brought up, but we'll wait and see. Some may ridicule such talk because it borders on the fanciful and fails to deal with the here and now. Still, it points to a reality within us, not without, that simply won't go away no matter what. That means we have to confront it sooner or later. Such is part of this article's focus.

As for this essay, attention is more upon just how extensive are the expectations we hold and how much they fluctuate over the course of time. They seem to come and go pretty much like our moods, but the sense of an observer—undefinable yet very real—remains. Being aware of this simple fact during the course of a given day is a major breakthrough because it seems so few people get this far. The trouble is sustaining this insight characteristic of an impartial observer and living in accord with it over time; each person will differ according to his stick-to-edness. Anyway, the important point is not to be overcome by the disconcerting discovery of our lack of attention. Besides, it's essential to stress the fact that this observer is impartial and doesn't make judgments. Getting this far at least sets the stage to see how the cluster of expectations we experience daily may be reduced to a single expectation which is their source.

So if we manage to cut through our run-of-the-mill expectations and attend more upon that ultimate expectation which has the potential of banishing every type of negation, we're on the right path. By no means is it easy to make this shift, to reduce the many to the one. We're attached to our expectations because they are the source of our joys as well as our fears. Relinquishing them can be like giving up on life itself. No question, the best training to make the shift comes into play when we've been disappointed in a major way. In other words, when all our idols have been smashed to the ground. We know that once this distinction between expectations and *the* expectation at the heart of our lives is made and we've shed that desire to live in accord with them, we see that path laid out before us more clearly. Talk of a path and images like it convey the idea of movement. In the case at hand the image should be taken lightly because in reality there is no movement which is a tremendously liberating discovery. And so having lived with such a conglomerate of pretenses is painful, but deep down we persist in maintaining their reality. Bumping up the real world alters our multiple expectations, yet instead of abandoning our pretenses, we tinker with them until we bump into reality again, repeating the process innumerable times but hopefully for shorter periods of time.

Closely aligned to this desire for absolute fulfillment are thoughts and sentiments of a philosophical or religious nature. We may alternate between the two and have them work together when we find it convenient. Expectations based upon them go a long way to ameliorating our distress, yet even they tend to peter out after a while. At least they point us in the right direction, that is, toward a reality greater than ourselves that's guiding our lives. The problem is that we project our expectations, however noble, upon this transcendent reality and are disappointed when they don't come through. It boils down to our preference for form, even negative ones, over that which lacks form. To speak like this sounds a bit disconcerting but experience proves it out. We can go on merrily for years entertaining a religious form, however subtle, but in end, find it is lacking. The problem is what to do when we get to that point or better, stop and think that we just might happen to be there already. There aren't easy ways in speaking about how to comport ourselves in this regard without reliance upon form, but that's required in this situation. We come to the realization that the task so proposed is alien to us which means some kind of exterior intervention is called for.

So what do we do, if anything? Wallow in our misery? That's not desirable, of course, but unfortunately we remain passive to thoughts and events without knowing why and without taking an active stance toward them. The trouble with this sharp and sometimes painful dichotomy between expectations and expectation is not having adequate instruction as how to overcome it. A concrete, quite banal example. While writing this very section I was expecting the arrival of an important computer part ordered several days ago. I had spent the past few days mulling over whether it will arrive on time, checking the UPS tracking website to follow its movement from the Midwest to here. This waiting period was punctuated with a number of games of online solitaire, a classic way of fidgeting. On occasion I regretted not having spent the extra bucks for overnight delivery, but it was too late.

The expectation of the package increased the day of its projected arrival and colored all my activity. Then a few hours before suddenly I lost interest, knowing with 99.99% certainty it would show up. In other words, expectation over this stupid package blotted out my innate happiness and ran wild with it. Nothing changed in my external behavior. Perhaps it would if the package went missing or was delayed, a dreadful thought! Now that it's almost here, where's the expectation? It vanished like smoke, and I was stuck with the actual physical object coveted for five long days. Thoughts came pouring in on how I had wasted so much of those days and didn't feel inclined to do much else. You'd think arrival of the computer part would fix this, but it didn't. Instead, it left behind a sense of wasted time. It was intensified by the fact that the expectation at

the heart of our lives was just about washed out. Returning to it is always possible though for most of us, is tinged with guilt of varying degrees...varying insofar as the distance we've strayed and the time it takes to get back on track.

While this is a simple example of a concrete expectation, it offered a lesson not so much about humility (that was included, of course) but more importantly, about how this whole ball of wax got rolling. Learning from it might preclude future behavior or better, the cascade of never-ending thoughts about it. First it was important not to bemoan my stupidity and feel sorry for myself. This is where we can easily get stuck. We fall into a relatively minor rut which quickly spreads out and does a real number on you. Some people are more adept than others at disguising how they hide their pain under such circumstances while others are less so. Regardless, everyone is afflicted one way or another. To compensate, each one of us is walking around with his or her private hopes-for-the-future, most of which aren't fulfilled. Then we go home and close the bedroom door for the night, tossing and turning the whole while until the next morning. All this, of course, is reenforced by the constant stream of news to which we're tuned in during the day. It's an environment to which we've grown accustomed and worse, have taken for granted. Waking up to this bizarre world is not unlike that cave dweller in Plato's **Republic** who finally sees the prison in which he had lived and exchanges it for the light. In other words, this age-old myth has enduring repercussions.

With all this in mind it seemed there was room to try something new. At first it was unclear because everyone we encounter seems stuck in some kind of rut. That is, they are looking for something other than the place in which they had been born. As the saying goes, wherever you go, there you are. Instead of being bothered by it, seeing this as clearly as humanly possible is a gift in its own right. When you're in a rut, you're more passive to events or better, allow events to keep you under their control even though the possibility to walk away is always present. It's equivalent of giving them permission to lord it over you, and gladly they take you up on the offer. If these events mediated by our thoughts suddenly became alive and were able to communicate with us, they'd think we were crazy being submissive to their every whim.

In light of this our task is to recognize the presence of these thoughts which affect our emotions. Such a simple gesture has the miraculous effect of denying them lordship over us, thereby allowing them to wither away. This is preferable to combating them head-on. Thoughts and emotions excel at frontal attacks but are powerless at anything coming at them from the rear or obliquely. We know this theoretically but are frankly quite slow, even stupid, to put it into practice. On the other hand, the thoughts know this (after all, they are part of us, arising deep from within us) and are expert at deceiving us.

How do they effect this? By making relentless, unceasing assaults day and night. Night is the more dangerous time because we're asleep. Even if we lay awake thoughts pummel us with a relentlessness that we find hard to comprehend at the next day's light when we reflect back on what had transpired. Compare them with the same thoughts we're having during the day. Same stuff but the night creates an atmosphere where the thoughts and our responses to them are far more potent. In fact, upon waking you wonder how you survived the night and why you had been left so helpless despite the well-intentioned prayers the evening before.

But it's within our reach to entertain the idea of a physical activity or gesture as a means to counter this unrelenting assault which wounds us. For example, we can use the image of walking and apply it to simply leaving behind the mess that has been afflicting us even though it's impossible to walk away from ourselves. Walking is a better image than running especially when we go at it with a nice, gentle but persistent stride. Thus it is one of the best images out there when it comes to depict taking an active stance. It stands in sharp contrast to the stationary prison-like servitude to which we had submitted ourselves both knowingly and unknowingly. Conversely, it seems we're more stationary, even sedentary, when we're in this servitude. It's the perfect gateway for depression. Walking is one of the most natural acts we can perform in addition to being being representative of an active stance. Taking this image further, when we're out for a walk—a saunter as Thoreau said in the context of an essay (*Walk to Wachusett*)—we're imitating a walk to the *sainte terre* or holy land, hence his play on the word “saunter.” And like most forms of physical exercise we notice that our minds become cleared up almost immediately, regaining their natural state, if you will.

In the context of this essay the image of walking communicates non-verbally that at least for now we're not entertaining any expectations but are simply enjoying ourselves. We wouldn't be out walking with the intent of anticipating some event or the like which would spoil it altogether. That's why people do it, simple as that. Right away you can see this on the expression of people's faces as they enjoy themselves sauntering alongside the road or wherever. Obviously thoughts and emotions arise, but there's something about the arm and leg motion that whisks them away even before we become conscious of them. In other words, walking helps to keep the wolves at bay. We can't be out walking all the time. Nevertheless, the lesson learned from physical activity's effect upon our thoughts shows that pent up energy has to be released somehow which otherwise would build up in the form of troubling thoughts and emotions. They are not unlike a pendulum which continues to swing and gradually comes to a stop. In the meanwhile we have to put up with these disturbing swings or various types of self-inflicting wounds.

So we ask ourselves why we are so often out of joint. Many of the just mentioned thoughts are expectations or to put it in another way, mental pictures we've fabricated and impose on the world. Thus we wish the world to conform to us, not the other way around. There's nothing bad about the mental pictures we take; we fail to recognize that they are partial in that they don't take into consideration the whole of reality. So the question, of course, is bringing into alignment our personal "photo album" with what is outside us. Another way of putting this: allowing what's outside us to fill up our partial view on the world. This sounds easy in theory but another thing in reality. Much of the dread comes from a falsely based anticipation, namely, that we have to renounce something big while not being sure about the return. Such a view of renunciation is ill-conceived. It's more like shaking off a burden that has been weighing us down that we may walk aright.

Right from birth we've had a tendency to project preconceived ideas onto the world at large. It has become so endemic that barely are we consciousness of it. Or to put it another way, no longer do we question ourselves as to how we got that way but act accordingly. What's even more remarkable is that we consider this abnormal state as being natural. That's why writing about it is quite difficult because we're in a realm seldom discussed and where adequate ways of expression begin to fall away. Furthermore, our language is geared more toward this unquestioning state of affairs we've had since birth. It doesn't suit the topic at hand, namely, the need to overcome our passiveness with regard to the thoughts and emotions parading continuously before our minds. These embody our expectations, our hopes for the future and are conditioned by all that we've built up in the reservoir of our memories. Furthermore, this reservoir has numerous sub-divisions. We have thoughts in accord with a few general tendencies that repeat themselves over a long period of time and affect the way we "take pictures" which is done with a certain regularity and in accord with a given form. If not, we wouldn't be able to function or such is our conclusion.

Rarely if ever do we consider ourselves as being passive to what life offers, priding ourselves as following an active and dynamic lifestyle. As for passivity, there comes to mind, for example, the image of a cow or horse standing for hours on end in a field. Near when I live there is such a horse. He's out there in the field all day "doing nothing" which makes me wonder how he is perceiving reality. Certainly he looks passive but can't be in the way we're discussing because he's a horse, not a human being. Still, I think of this horse throughout the day almost wishing to sneak by and observe him as though I weren't present. Finally one day after watching him over an extended period of time I stopped at the fence which caused him to approach me, friendly enough but

mostly out of curiosity. Perhaps this was one of the few interruptions my friend has had in a long time though he seems cared for properly. Imagine...being sent out into a field and remaining there all day, day after day. I'm sure he's more confined in his stable at night where he continues to stand around just like outdoors. But does all this hanging around bother him? It doesn't seem so.

Pressing this image further, what would it be like to follow my friend's daily "schedule?" I've thought of that more than once while driving by as he remains pretty much motionless in the field...motionless but certainly attentive. He seems to prefer this over thinking though I have no recourse to the way horses think (if they do so at all). Anyway, he reminds me of the Zen story about a few men who see their friend standing all alone on a hill. They approach him and ask if he's enjoying the view. "No" was the answer. Then they asked if he were looking for his lost dog, waiting for someone else and so forth. Each question received the same unequivocal "no." When asked one more time in exasperation there came the answer "I'm just standing." Most likely we we'd be like those friends though more exasperated because of our immersion within an ultra-busy modern environment. "Just standing" is tantamount to suicide or if not that, being afflicted with a severe mental handicap. Such is what my friend the horse is doing out in the field. He has no expectations nor anything else beyond the next meal which surely will come.

Although I think of "my" horse frequently, nevertheless he's passive in the animal mode, not human, and never could achieve an active form of attention which is what we're driving at in this article. To get from the passive to active mood is akin to raising someone from the dead, that's how radical it is. Everyone around us seems caught in a prison clinging to the barred windows while from the beginning the door had been flung wide open. It was installed, if you will, more or less as a means to support the illusion in which we've been living.<sup>1</sup> Loosening our grip on the windows is easy as well as turning around and walking out the door. However, we simply don't do it and probably wouldn't even if properly informed of the situation. The difficulty in making the transition lays in a shift of understanding that requires radical realignment. Because nothing physical is involved, the image of strenuousness isn't present. Mentioning this is important because automatically we're wary of something for nothing or of something which is too good to be true. It's been drilled into our heads since childhood.

Usually when we hear the word "active" it comes across as aggressive. For "passive" we have a similar misunderstanding, remaining inactive in the face of things

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<sup>1</sup> Installed by us, not by anyone else nor by some divine being.

beyond our control. “Supine” might be akin to this attitude, pretty much a surrender. Getting these two words right is important because they impact how we behave in daily life. We're more comfortable with the idea of being active in an aggressive society which tends to look with disdain upon so-called passive behavior. However, society can't grasp the distinction even though it's within the reach of our understanding. It's this lack of exposure we need to overcome else any advancement in understanding is bound to falter. And so this short essay, despite its limitations, attempts to do just that while at the same time taking pleasure in exploring the subject. If taking such delight is absent, the enterprise isn't worth the effort.

We could use the word “male” for active and “female” for passive which is in accord with general thinking of such matters. As just noted, the former is a bit suspect nowadays with preference going to the latter. However, such points of view are rather superficial and don't apply here. First comes the female which ties in with concrete reality as we deal with it all the time. In simple English, plain ol' “stuff” which makes up our world. It receives its being even if dumb and unmoved while remaining the bedrock upon which all else rests. Without this “stuff” we couldn't exist because it's all around (and within) us. Its impact upon our lives is neither good nor bad but just there at our disposal.

As human beings we're not made the same way as this “stuff” because we have minds. That means we have the capacity of dealing with reality in a responsible fashion. We can use this “stuff” in daily life in unimaginable ways but ways which are so common they're right under our noses. Such talk sounds active but in practice isn't. Rather, it's aggressive, even if well-intentioned, with the intent of imposing one's own stamp. That stamp turns out to be a drastically reduced slice of reality...really drastic when you take into consideration the universe. Such an imposition isn't bad as we'd be tempted to think. It's partial and needs fleshing out, a lot of fleshing out to be more accurate, and therein is the heart of the matter. The active stance of concern here differs from this common understanding insofar as it belongs to our attention, not our behavior, while lacking an aggressive tendency. Sounds a bit strange, that something could be active while not taking immediate physical action and at the same time not canceling itself out. It would be better to think of this specialized use of the word “active” as a way of attention towards everyone and everything. It differs radically from our presumed attentiveness which enables us to get through a given day and survive for the next one.

So here we stand at the threshold of a new understanding about ourselves and our relationship both with people and everything else. Not that the ideas presented here are new—far from it—but they represent a desire to turn attention to an aspect of ourselves

that receives less attention than it deserves. It turns out that once we're in it, we realize that never had we left it. We have the instinctive feeling that never have we left our natural state, our birthright, but simply forgot about it.<sup>2</sup> We might expect a change in our external lives but no such thing happens. Our expectation (and that gets to a central theme of this essay) is thwarted which might tempt us to go no further.

This lack of expectation applies to a lack of conversion either religiously or philosophically speaking. Speaking like this might sound odd since it goes against a deep-seated belief bordering upon prejudice. And that prejudice says we live in a condition other than one we should be or one we *expect* to have. In other words, we operate on two parallel tracks without realizing it. One is life-as-it-is right now and the other is an ideal held out by, say, religious doctrine. Always the two never quite meshed practically speaking as far as Western thought and spirituality goes which makes the proposal offered here hard to swallow. Again, the proposal is hampered by a personal inability to express the matter as clearly as it deserves. Nevertheless, that must not stand in our way. These two planes reveal how deep-rooted are our beliefs in the need for some kind of “change.” If we don't “change” we stagnate or revert to an earlier undesirable state. The goal is to keep moving forward or progress which is so dear to the modern way of thinking yet is *the* obstacle to grasp the distinction between being passive and being active.

It's important to bring this matter forward because when dealing with spiritual matters we have a latent expectancy for something different and better than what we have here and now. Unfortunately that never comes our way which can contribute to a loss of belief in God. However, we can allow one exception which applies to the spiritual life. Often a beginner will have some dramatic changes in his life and may be surprised, if not disappointed, when they fizzle away. Obviously this is an occasion for correct discernment and encouragement. So instead of fretting about sustaining our initial fervor of religious conversion or adapting our lives to a set of noble principles, we take to heart the gesture of holding our attention active. This is putting it rather succinctly because we are in a fuzzy, hard-to-define area which defies molding into a given form.

So what's involved is paying attention to each and every aspect of the stuff around us while foregoing judgment upon it. This attention differs from the usual spiritual approach, of distancing ourselves from the physical world. The problem is that we have to return to the everyday world while retaining memory of the spiritual one. Such is a

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<sup>2</sup> Here memory is used in the ancient Greek sense of *anamnesis*, of recollection with regard to our fundamental identity as human beings. The Church Fathers took up this theme and developed extensively as noted in many places throughout this Lectio Divina Homepage.

fairly common way of presenting spirituality, at least in the Christian tradition. The task of focusing upon the stuff about us can be performed under virtually any circumstances and involves a gesture which can't be put into words but only hinted at. These gestures are to be performed discreetly and for a short time and frequently despite what comes our way in the course of a given day. If the gesture doesn't come, try it a few seconds later and so forth. The gesture proposed sounds different from normal spiritual practices and indeed is. That's because it ties directly into our embodied-ness as we're functioning in the world at the present moment.

Such attention to physicality consists of both an engagement and withdrawal working simultaneously. Engagement in that no longer do we pay attention to form—each and every kind of form that comes our way—and simply observe their rise and fall before our eyes. The two may sound similar but in actuality are not. We might as well adopt this approach sooner than later because never do we lack for forms which stream to us continuously as thoughts and emotions. Yet once we allow forms to pass their merry way, automatically we find ourselves withdrawn from them minus interference from any outside source. Whether they do the withdrawing or we do is beside the point. What counts is that the deed is accomplished, and we're set free perhaps for the first time in our lives.

A slight refinement here, if you will. Thinking in terms of freedom is more accurate than being liberated. To be free means that we've been that way since birth whereas to be liberated suggests an existing bondage from which we must be let go. Once we realize this distinction, suddenly we discover there is no task to which we set ourselves can free us. Due to past conditioning, we expect to pay dearly when it comes to something this good. Obviously it takes time for this primeval error to sink in before we can taste what we've never lost but have been ignorant of. All this is quite miraculous, really, for we've touched upon the very heart of a matter that has troubled everyone down the ages. We've been trained since the womb to look for some type of discipline to carry out over an extended period of time, preferably laborious, but discover that no such thing is required of us. This has nothing to do with difficult vs. easy. Such a way of thinking is obsolete. Even the thought of it brings a huge sigh of relief. Nevertheless, we have to conceive of the inner task with great care while on the look-out for pre-conceived ideas as to how the spiritual life is to be followed. We've gotten these ideas from our parents and culture, so by the time we've grown up they're established. To be sure, they aren't bad but incomplete. We know this deep down and have a hard time articulating it, but getting this out there is very important.

In actuality the “stuff” out there or outside ourselves is exerting itself on us

constantly, not the other way around. We're not happy with that because we're not in charge, and one way of dealing with it is to storm in and take it over. We go ahead in bull-headed fashion which we could justify as an active stance but in actuality is a reactive gesture...a ruse of sorts we use...to counter our dissatisfaction from being passive to events. On the other hand, the stance to adopt is one of active attention, not one which is passive, with regard to our thoughts and emotions. All perception seems reducible to memory, so in essence we're reacting to memories of what we've experienced, even a nanosecond ago. We have it in our power to stare down everything around us or better, looking at it like that man on the hill who was misunderstood by all his friends. Being misunderstood can be a tough pill to swallow but turns out to be a genuine boon because it leaves us alone to pursue things ordinarily we wouldn't be able to. The price of isolation coupled with maltreatment may be high to pay, but the reward is far higher.

So being active in our attention is a tougher job than at first imagined. It's a struggle insofar as we have to engage in a process of un-learning, something quite unfamiliar to most of us. We're accustomed to learning stuff but to reverse the process, if you will, is another matter. Because it's foreign to our nature we could be tempted to think the whole enterprise amounts to nonsense. Yet both thinking and speaking like this is paradoxical; there's nothing "hard" involved. The same applies to "easy," for the un-learning at hand situates us in a place where both don't apply.

We might tap into this attentiveness for a while and enjoy what comes our way, but it doesn't last. The reason? Perseverance in maintaining it consistently ranks among the most demanding task we undertake. This is due to the highly fractured attention span we moderns must contend with, far more than, say, our parents who weren't "wired" as most of us are today. Because of this we may require more aides to wean ourselves off these attachments than would be the case with past generations. One consists in a theme developed several years ago and posted in an article on this home page, that is, the "as-if" scenario for which Hans Vaihinger is famous. He puts forth a claim we hear about in various forms, namely, that can't know reality as-it-is and require some type of support to get along in the world. The aide consists of the "as-if" proposal, a fictive device quite natural to us all, for we use it more often than we realize but don't reflect upon it. One example may be found among children when playing games or simply pretending. They can behave *as if* they were cowboys and Indians knowing full well their own identity yet adapting to the game with remarkable accuracy. They do this by accessing their memories, of having stored up there the minutest information about cowboys and Indians. Then they access it spontaneously. They seem to have direct access to an "as if mechanism" which we as adults share and do access but with less spontaneity and gusto.

One serious example of “as if” Vaihinger gives from law is that if a son designated as heir to a fortune becomes severely incapacitated as to no longer function yet remains in a vegetative state the law treats him *as if* he were dead. A common one we as adults may come up with is as when standing on a mountain top. The view is exhilarating, and we could say that we feel *as if* we're on top of the world. Obviously not (Mount Everest excepted, quite unlikely). We know for sure that the puny knob isn't Everest but have enough information about that highest mountain in the world to corroborate our present experience. In fact, our experience on the hill may be more meaningful than actually being on Mount Everest.

So where does this little experiment with the fictive device of “as if” take us, if anywhere? It prevents us from becoming too serious and offers a valid way of comporting ourselves while not removing us from the nitty-gritty details of daily life. “As if” is an active stance of our attention and once made, uses images from our memory that are light, not heavy. We know this by the invigoration we feel while engaged in an “as if” scenario. We're not weighed down with creating mental constructs nor are we assaulted by them. As Vaihinger would say, these constructs give provisional information about the world while we know full well that such information is not complete.

As already noted, “as if” is a fictive device and hence is provisional. It can assist us in keeping our attention active and from falling into a passive mode where we're subject to all kinds of whims and fancies. In other words, such a device keeps us in our natural mode, the way we've been built and not made prisoners of our own devices. Some of what our minds spew forth can bear a semblance to fictive devices but are not. They're too compulsive and serious whereas fictive devices arise spontaneously and have a light air about them. It's as if (!) the fictive device releases some magical potion into our systems, lighten us up and protects us from being slaves to our own mental devices.

Allow introducing a little sidebar to all this which admittedly is a concern central to us all. Why is God invisible? Why do so many people persist in ascribing to such a being which can't be perceived, that is to say, apart from habit and cultural influences? He's not just invisible but doesn't give clues as to his existence. You'd think that if someone...something...were present everywhere and at the same time would take a different tack. The usual response to this all encompassing reality is faith which is a less than suitable word suggesting that we steam forward blindly from what we've been told. Not exactly a good image for us, especially nowadays. Yet the more we consider this thing called God and all the stuff that had been written about him over the centuries, it

just may be true. Everyone agrees that the prime characteristic for God is omni-presence (all other 'omni-s' derive from it). It seems there's no other choice except that God be like this. The argument on his behalf is that should he decide to manifest himself, he wouldn't be recognized.

We might look around for an analogue to this invisibility and the accompanying “omni-s.” Yet the more we reflect on this invisibility, the more we see a paradox at work. The most accurate perception of transcendence we can imagine is tied in with physicality, that the extremes two are inextricably linked, even attracted to each other. That means we humans are in the middle wanting part of one and part of another, never being able to resolve the connection between the two. Because of this, we don't recognize it as pointing directly to that which is invisible even though the two are as close as close can be. It's as if (again) something is blocking our perception. Here we're using the Vaihingerian formula a bit differently but in a way that addresses an age-old question, how can we perceive this much talked about invisible reality?

To bring all this mambo-jumbo to a conclusion, consider a Greek phrase associated with Gregory of Nyssa, *aisthesis tes parousias* or perception of presence. The former word pertains to the use of our senses and the latter means literally a being-about or *para* which connotes being along beside. And so the phrase may be rendered as feeling-of-that-which-is-beside.<sup>3</sup> *Parousia* pertains to the divine presence which is beside us yet never can we grasp it. For this reason the preposition *para-* is important: beside the *ousia* or being, not with it. *Para-* gives a little distance between us and God, a kind of time delay mechanism which always will be present...built-in, if you will. We shouldn't regret this gap—not exactly accurate but it'll suffice for now—between our innate active awareness and the tendency to slip into one of passivity where we're led around by the nose almost against our free will.

To have an *aisthesis* or perception is to have a feeling. This is not of the transitory emotional variety but involves the whole person bearing down upon an object all at once. Part of us doesn't do the *aisthesis* while the rest of us does. We do it altogether and without delay. We don't feel something here and at another time there. It's all or nothing. One way of describing *aisthesis* is by asking a question like how do you feel from all points of view and at once? This differs from the usual ones which deal with one part of us...our health, relationships and so forth. We can respond to the partial

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3 An essay is devoted to *aisthesis tes parousias* on this same Lectio Divina Homepage. Also it is mentioned a number of times in other articles as well as on the Gregory of Nyssa homepage. Because this fourth century Christian author has developed the phrase to a high degree, it's worth looking at instances (listed in that article) where he uses *aisthesis tes parousias*.

query readily enough but not to the global one. It involves too much to grasp at one time by any sense or combination of senses or the intellect. For this reason it can be described only as beside...*para*...us: beside us but not outside, beyond nor within us. Our attention, when active, thus escapes categories or pigeon-holing. Only when we slip into being passive do we corrupt the meaning of *aisthesis tes parousias*, not otherwise.

So does all this make sense? Some may claim the article has an air of unreality, an acceptable criticism, because it is taking stabs at a reality (*ousia*) normally outside (*para*-) our *aisthesis*. As mentioned earlier, hesitation to write about it can can gnaw at you and prevent advancing ideas on the subject. Even if what's presented here is unclear, too concise and presumes from the reader an understanding of terms which aren't quite familiar, a future article may straighten this out. At the same time more reflection along lines set forth seems to be in order after which this need will be addressed. That means this article is a continuation of the one before it and so may be the same for the next. Thus we have an ever growing series of essays or reflections which essentially look at the same material but from slightly different perspectives. The main point is not to stop but to be ever in a state of (active) movement which will forestall the passivity so endemic to our human nature.

It seems that *aisthesis tes parousias* is representative of our attention when it's either active or passive and governs how we take in stuff from the outside world. From there it transits to thoughts and emotions which make us more passive, and we end up with a double passivity: one from the outside flowing into us and another from with us flowing into our awareness and hence keeping us captive. Again, reference to the cave in Plato's **Republic** has yet another application. On the other hand, the *parousia* part of the phrase represents our active awareness about/beside or *para*- what we perceive. When *aisthesis* is linked to *parousia* we get the phrase which is representative of our being attentive in an active fashion, not passive to every whim and fancy that comes down the road. This association, if valid, can be a rich field of exploration. And so the article at hand is an introduction to it where we may advance under the guidance of Gregory of Nyssa who had described *aisthesis tes parousias* with unparalleled eloquence.

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