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Speaking, Living and Discerning the TRUTH

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Telos - *en d'autres termes, la cible, le but, la destination, la fin. Un mot grec riche en tradition. Un titre qui se résume à l'action de lancer une flèche. La source est identifiée, l'objectif aussi.* Telos *est la revue de Domuni Universitas, université principalement en ligne des dominicains, dont les enseignants, les chercheurs, les étudiants et les partenaires sont présents sur les cinq continents. La* Revue Telos *est ainsi une revue internationale en sciences humaines, sociales et religieuses, en libre accès, publiée sur Internet, dans le but de stimuler la réflexion et de contribuer au dialogue de la pensée.*

Sa structure s'inscrit dans la tradition, celle de la disputatio, *comprise non pas comme une vaine controverse, mais comme un lieu de rencontre de différents points de vue sur un même thème.*

Les langues, les cultures et les expériences sont souvent très différentes, mais la diversité converge avec l'Internet, et plus particulièrement à travers cette revue scientifique.

Pour découvrir tous les numéros.

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Index

Introduction

Srećko Koralija, PhD
Editor in Chief

Truth is among the most enduring and demanding concerns of human existence. It is sought in scholarship, confessed in faith, tested in community, and embodied in concrete forms of life. To speak the truth requires intellectual clarity and moral courage. To live the truth calls for the integration of conviction and practice. To discern the truth presupposes judgment capable of distinguishing what leads to communion and flourishing from what distorts persons and communities. The contributions gathered in this issue under the title *Speaking, Living and Discerning the Truth* approach these interrelated dimensions from various perspectives.

The first article, "Towards a Better Understanding of Dominican Spirituality: The Dominican Way of Life," by Tony W. A. Rivera, examines the spirituality of the Order of Preachers as an integrated form of existence oriented toward the truth of the Gospel. Rivera demonstrates how communal life, liturgical prayer, and disciplined study form a coherent path of spiritual maturation. In this perspective, truth is not reduced to theoretical knowledge. Rather, it is encountered through what the author calls the "Grace of the Word," a dynamic that unites contemplation and action. The Dominican way thus offers a practical framework for those seeking meaning, dialogue, and existential depth in both religious and secular contexts.

The second article, "John Henry Newman, Truth, and University Education in an Age of AI," by Tuan Viet Cao, discusses the role of truth in higher education. Engaging critically with John Henry Newman's reflections on the university, the article argues that education is fundamentally concerned with the formation of judgment rather than the mere transmission of information. Newman's vision of reality as intelligible, truth as the norm of inquiry, and theology as a legitimate academic discipline is brought into dialogue with contemporary challenges such as marketisation, vocational reductionism, and AI-mediated learning. At a moment when technological tools can simulate understanding without possessing it, Cao's study offers a defense of education as the cultivation of persons capable of responsible assent and reality-oriented inquiry.

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The third article, "Towards a Criterion Based Understanding of Gossip," by Srećko Koralija and Kristijan Krkač, explores the moral significance of everyday speech. Through a criterion-based analysis, the authors distinguish between the procedural structure of gossip and its normative implications. Their study presents the ambivalent nature of gossip: depending on intention, context, and consequences, it may either foster social cohesion or contribute to moral disintegration and reputational harm. The article demonstrates that speech is never fully morally neutral. To discern the truth includes discerning when communication serves the common good and when it undermines trust and community.

The final article, "L'expérience mystique nous dit-elle quelque chose sur l'ordre du réel? L'exemple de Thérèse d'Avila," by Oleg Malashenko, addresses the epistemic significance of mystical experience. Focusing on the case of Teresa of Ávila, the article asks whether a deeply personal encounter with God can yield objective insight into the structure of reality. By examining the communicability and reproducibility of mystical experience, Malashenko argues that such experience, although exceeding the limits of positivist proof, constitutes a meaningful experiential datum. Without directly demonstrating the attributes of God, Teresa's experience supports a metaphysical vision in which a transcendent first principle grounds reality and becomes manifest within human subjectivity.

At a time marked by informational overload, technological acceleration, and deep cultural fragmentation, the question of truth acquires renewed urgency. Artificial intelligence can generate persuasive answers without understanding; public discourse is increasingly shaped by polarization and rumor; educational institutions face pressure to prioritize utility over wisdom; and religious communities are challenged to witness credibly to the truths they profess. In such a context, the present volume offers a modest contribution.

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Towards a Better Understanding of Dominican Spirituality: The Dominican Way of Life

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Abstract

This essay explores the essential dispositions and dynamics of Dominican spirituality, arguing that the "Dominican Way" is an integrated method of living where spiritual growth and everyday action are one. By analyzing the life of St. Dominic and the foundational structures of the Order of Preachers, the author identifies key practices - communal life, liturgical prayer, and disciplined study - that foster a "Grace of the Word." Moving beyond abstract "truth-seeking," the paper demonstrates how this spirituality engages with the existential realities of the human condition, offering a practical framework for both religious and secular individuals to seek maturity, find meaning in dialogue, and live with greater intensity.

Keywords: Dominican Spirituality, St. Dominic, Way of Life, Existential Dialogue, Grace of the Word

St Dominic and the Order of Preachers

Much has been written about the life of St. Dominic and the history of the Order of Preachers; therefore, this brief article will only highlight the key elements as they pertain to the spirituality and, therefore, the *way* of life of the Order and its members. By making this statement this author is taking the position that for a religious order in general, and for the Dominicans in particular, the spiritual life of its members is their *way* of life, their *way* of life is how they live out their spirituality. This article contends that Dominican spirituality is not a static set of theological principles but a dynamic "way of life" where the spiritual and the practical are indistinguishable. I argue that the maturity of the Dominican vocation is found in the imitation of St. Dominic's "Grace of the Word" - a disposition that requires both internal contemplative depth and an external, dialogical engagement with the world. By centering on specific dispositions such as communal life, study, and prayer, the Dominican method provides a structured pathway for any individual - member of the Order or not - to navigate the complexities of existence and move toward a more integrated, holy life.

Secondly, the focus on certain dispositions and dynamics of the Dominican spiritual life is meant to help members of the Order prayerfully consider where they are in their spiritual growth and in their imitation of Christ through following the example of St. Dominic. Thirdly, this article will lay out some practical considerations for maturing one's spiritual life along the Dominican *way*. And, lastly, this essay will conclude with considerations of a broader application of this *way* of life for non-members of the Order who would, no doubt, benefit from this method.

To apply this theory concretely, and frame the rest of this paper, please consider two illustrative cases where the Dominican method meets the search for purpose in lived experience. First, in the crisis of modern professional life, the disposition of *Studium* (Study) acts as a disciplined attempt to look beneath the surface of daily labor to find where one's work intersects with the common good and leads to practical engagement with others. Second, in contexts of extreme adversity, the *Common Life* provides a template for resilience. Rather than an individualistic struggle, the Dominican way suggests that life is survived

through the "unity of heart" found in communal support - imitating Dominic's own practice of selling his books to feed the poor during a famine. To better ground these observations, the next section offers a brief biographical sketch of our beloved Father Dominic.

A Brief Biographical Sketch

St. Dominic de Guzmán (1170–1221), founder of the Order of Preachers, remains an important model of Christian holiness and evangelization. Spiritual biographies - such as "Saint Dominic's Way of Life," "Saint Dominic: The Grace of the Word," and works like "The Spirit of Saint Dominic" and "The Life of Saint Dominic" - highlight how his spirituality weaves together love of God, Scripture, and neighbor into a unified path of holiness.[1] As one author succinctly put it, "St. Dominic made of his soul an ordered unity."[2] This unity is predicated on the depth of his intellectual life, prayer, and love of neighbor, each a way to grow in unity with Christ and each based on his profound love and devotion to Scripture. "The man lived in intimacy with the Word of God"[3] Central to this path is the reality of dialogue. While the Dominican tradition is often associated with the rigorous pursuit of "Veritas" (Truth), the historical example of St. Dominic suggests this was never a purely academic exercise. Dominic "along the paths" did not simply lecture; he entered into a deep, existential dialogue with the people he encountered, often those struggling with profound questions of survival and identity. This approach suggests that we do not seek truth in a vacuum, but rather through the intensity of understanding life as it is lived.

This is the essence of St. Dominic's spirituality. He strove for unity between the dispositions he had to love of Scripture, neighbor, prayer. This unity, of course, was centered on God, through a more perfect modeling of Christ. But there is another very important aspect to St Dominic's life, work, and spirituality. He was devoted to seeking, understanding, and preaching Truth. While this article is not a deep philosophical exploration into the nature of Truth, it is important to note what Truth means in this all-too-important context.

Human beings naturally desire truth. This desire is satisfied in Christ, who is at once the *way* to arrive at truth and truth itself. In John's Gospel, Christ says, 'I am the *way*, the truth, and the light' (14:6). Truth is not just an abstract idea or a set of principles. Knowers of the truth adhere to the truth; Christ is the truth to which every Christian must conform. Truth is living. Truth is a person. Truth is Jesus Christ (emphasis added).[4] Therefore, followers of Christ, who follow Dominic's example, must cleave to the Truth, must seek Christ in Scripture, prayer, and *in service* to their neighbor. Clearly, love of Christ must mean love of Truth, and vice versa. It is critical to understand that "The Science of the Order of Preachers, the light Saint Dominic bestows, is the science of wisdom. Divine truth - pursued, investigated, preached, and loved - is the object and aim of Saint Dominic's order."[5] Or, put another way, "The genius of the Order is Truth."[6] For Clerissac, Dominicans are not only dedicated to Truth as doctrine, "but the very idea of truth as being the primordial character of the divine Life and of the Christian Revelation."[7]

Truth, thusly understood, is the star which illuminates our path and enables our following of Christ. Truth is the *way.* The object of study, prayer, and service is to know, live by, and share the Truth. The very name of the Order speaks to the need to preach Truth, which requires knowing it, living by it, and loving it, in order to share it properly. Thus, truth is not an abstract intellectual construct, it is the end and the means to loving God, self, and others.

Love of God, Scripture, and Neighbor

For the Christian, in general, and most certainly for the Dominican, the goal of this life is to grow in love of God, in union with God. We seek God in and through Christ, the way and the life (Jn 14:6), that we may be able to truly know and love God. This was what drove Dominic's study, prayer, and ultimately his preaching Christ to others. As noted, "Saint Dominic certainly is an example of a life given to Christ and a life flourish-

[1] Clerissac, H., O.P., *The Spirit of St. Dominic* (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, LLC, 2015); Bedouelle, G., O.P., *Saint Dominic: The Grace of the Word* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1987); Briscoe, P. M., O.P. and Janczyk, J. B., O.P., *Saint Dominic's Way of Life: A Path to Knowing and Loving God* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2021); Drane, A. T., *The Life of Saint Dominic* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1857).

[2] Clerissac, *The Spirit of St. Dominic*, 11.

[3] Bedouelle, *Saint Dominic: The Grace of the Word*, 19.

[4] Briscoe and Janczyk, *Saint Dominic's Way of Life: A Path to Knowing and Loving God*, 37.

[5] *Ibid.*, 36.

[6] Clerissac, *The Spirit of St. Dominic*, 41.

[7] *Ibid.*, 41.

ing in Christ… Dominic is also a powerful example of how a life ordered to contemplation and union with God changes the world."[8]

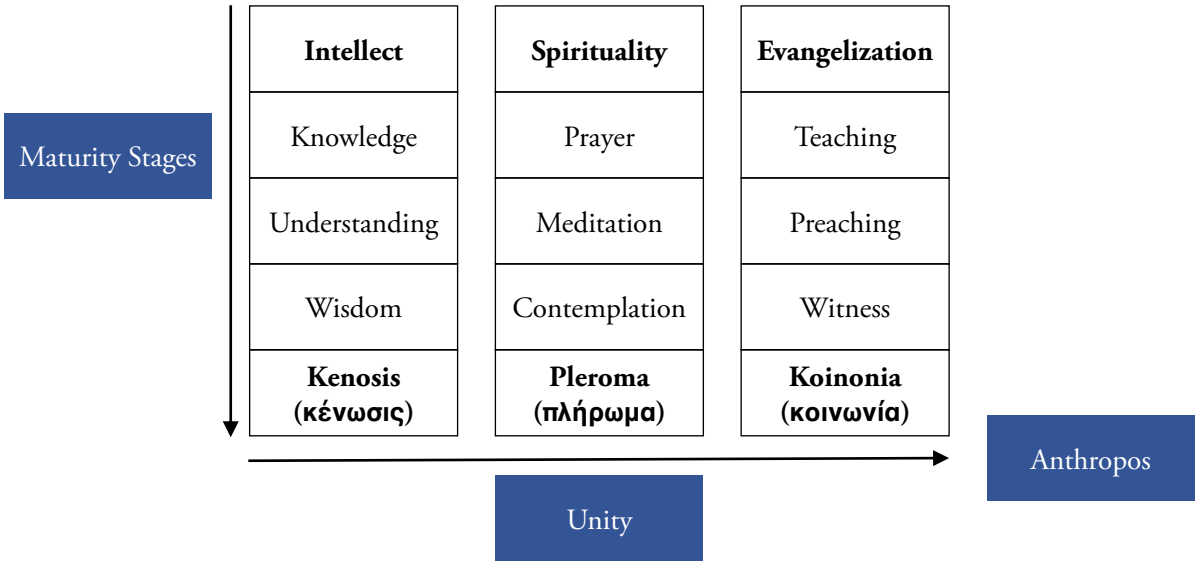
In other words, to get to know God, Dominic immersed himself in Scripture, studying it, and taking it to heart. His intellectual gift and God's grace unpacked the mysteries of the Scripture, which enabled a greater knowledge and understanding of God, which, in turn, culminated in a deep union with God. This union with God drove Dominic to preach the Gospel because love of God, union with God, inevitably leads to charity to all of God's children, as Jesus said to Peter, he said to Dominic, and to all of Dominic's followers, "If you love me, feed my sheep" (JN 21:15-17).

However, before Dominic evangelized the world through preaching, his journey began with God's grace calling him to greater understanding and love of Scripture. "…Dominic knew that in order to preach the Gospel, one must first live with the Word and in the Word."[9] He carried the Gospel of Matthew and the Letters of St. Paul with him wherever he went, spending countless hours reading and penetrating the mysteries therein contained. He prayed, meditated, and contemplated the word growing from knowledge to understanding to wisdom, and therefore being able to teach, preach, and bear witness to the Word and bring souls to greater unity with God.

Dominicans are likewise called, and the world should know a Dominican by these attributes. "Hence we know what characteristics to look for in St. Dominic's Order. His true children will bear the family likeness. They will be contemplatives, teachers, and apostles."[10] That this is so to this day is evidenced by the Order's motto, "*Laudare*, *Benedicere*, *Praedicare*," which means "To Praise, To Bless, To Preach." To praise God is the way our love of God is manifested; our love of neighbor is manifested through blessing others, and by bringing them the Gospel of Christ through preaching. However, this article is not intended to be an analytic or historical account. Rather, it is meant to identify the key dispositions and dynamics to aid in the perpetual formation that all members of the Order are called to and to serve the spiritual needs for those who choose to follow this Way of Life.

Dispositions and dynamics

Both within the Dominican tradition and more broadly among disciples of Christ, the love of God, Scripture, and Neighbor are critical dispositions that interact, increasing the power of each, through a powerful dynamic of unity in service of God's Truth. First, note that these dispositions are rooted in Christ's commandment to love our Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mt 22:37-38, Mk 12:30, Lk 10:27). Second, note that these dispositions: intellect, spirituality, and evangelization are each meant to mature as the Dominican matures in imitation of Christ through the imitation of Dominic, and that they are meant to grow in unity as Dominic exemplified. These combined dynamics of maturity and unity, rooted in Love of Truth are essential in Dominican formation, but more, they are essential in the development of the human person, whether a friar or lay disciple. The chart below is designed to depict these dispositions and dynamics in order to further this effort.



[8] Briscoe and Janczyk, *Saint Dominic's Way of Life: A Path to Knowing and Loving God*, 70–71.

[9] *Ibid.*, 67.

[10] Clerissac, *The Spirit of St. Dominic*, 12.

First, a word on form. The tabular structure is meant to convey the vertical flow of maturity and horizontal flow of unity, where the ultimate end is the fullness of the human person, the fulfilment of the human purpose - unity with God. The three columns represent dimensions of the way of life for the Dominican seeking a mature union with God. The three dimensions interact according to the row's dynamic, e.g. the more one knows, the more one prays, the better one teaches, etc. This represents unity of disposition, the example of St. Dominic and the goal of the Christian life. Here it is very important to remember that formation, through the grace of God, builds on nature. Thus, the individual selected to be formed in this way must have the natural disposition (inclination) in intellect, spirituality, and evangelization. They must be drawn (grace) to that way of life, and they must want it (nature). Given these elements a proper formation program builds across each row, even as it deepens in maturity by each column.

Within the column, each phase (level, step) represents a stage of maturity. For the first two, Intellect and Spirituality, the maturity flow should be well known and understood. The third, Evangelization, may be less clear. As the Dominican's intellectual life matures, they experience shifts from simple knowledge, by which is typically meant familiarity of facts such as key events in the life of Christ, Dominic, the Order; names and dates; etc. But what those things mean, comes through study and grace and results in an understanding of the calling, the mission, the purpose of the Dominican way of life. Likewise, in their prayer life, they grow from simple prayers, repetitions, entreaties, praise to meditation on the mysteries of the life of Christ. Meditation need not be sung or recited, be done in common, or be articulated in words at all. It is found in the silence of the heart before Christ. This can lead to ecstatic visions, movement by the Holy Spirit within to levels of seeing God that surpass the expectation, experience. This erases the veil and enables seeing God face-to-face. This is what is meant by contemplation, to be able to contemplate the face of our Beloved and bask in that love.

In the final column we begin with teaching, which requires a knowledge of facts and a strong prayer life that we may teach what is true and good. But when we are preaching, we must bring a deep understanding of purpose and a deep meditative power that each word be flung as if from a bow. And, finally, when in that grace-filled wisdom and contemplation the Dominican experiences God in their very soul, they grow resplendent with his grace and we need not teach, nor preach, for their very lives, movement, their very selves bear witness to love of Truth, love of God, love of Others. This is a light that leads others to Christ; this is an example that evangelizes others to follow Christ.

The telos (end) of each column is given in the final, bolded cell. The end of intellect is *kenosis*;[11] the end of spirituality is *pleroma*;[12] the end of evangelization is *koinonia*.[13] In the intellectual disposition the natural end (telos) is the realization one must die to self that God may live through one, just as Jesus forsook his equality with God to take on the form of a slave (Phil 2:5-11). Or, as St. Paul puts it elsewhere, "I have been crucified with Christ and the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me. I still live my human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:19-20).

In the spiritual dimension, prayer can (should) lead to meditation, which can (should) lead to contemplation. The end (telos) of spirituality is *pleroma*, the fullness of God, abiding in the individual—the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, unity with God. In the evangelization dimension, teaching, preaching, and bearing witness in how one lives, in what example one sets, the telos is unity with others in and through God - *koinonia*.[14] As Dominicans grow in this unity, it leads not only to their union with God, but, of course, to their unity as a family, as disciples of Christ, as an Order. For this to happen each disposition must be formed by grace building on nature through a formation dedicated to Sacred Truth.

[11] Kenosis (κένωσις) is a theological term that means "the act of emptying" or "self-emptying." It comes from the verb kenóō (κενόω), which means "to empty." The term is famously used in Philippians 2:7 to describe Jesus Christ's act of "emptying himself" by taking on the form of a human.

[12] Pleroma (πλήρωμα) literally means «fullness,» «completion,» or «that which fills.» In a theological context, particularly in Gnosticism and some Christian writings, it refers to the totality of divine powers or the fullness of the Godhead. The word is used in various ways in the New Testament to describe concepts like the «fullness of time» or the «fullness of God.»

[13] Koinonia (κοινωνία) is a very significant term, especially in a religious context, and refers to concepts like fellowship, communion, joint participation, and sharing. It›s often used to describe the intimate bond that unites Christians with each other and with God.

[14] Note: kenosis + indwelling + fellowship = church; put another way, love the Lord your God, love you neighbor as yourself.

Intellect

By intellect I do not mean publishing articles, books, etc., although these are certainly desirable. Rather, what I mean is a love of Truth which produces an intense curiosity about the Word of God and the lived experience of following the way of Christ. Whether that curiosity results in an academic life or excellent preaching, it is rooted in the example of St. Dominic. "The reading and study of Sacred Scripture was the height of Dominic's learning. Jordan of Saxony describes Dominic as a granary, storing up the seeds of the Word of God. But Jourdan is quick to tell us that Dominic did not simply store in his mind the wisdom he gained from Scripture, he lived it"[15] Following the rule of St. Augustine the friars gather for meals, read the Scripture, ensuring that they are always talking to God in prayer or about God in fellowship, bearing in mind, always, that "The Scriptures are the center of the relationship a friar has with God"[16] The intellect is the faculty, the disposition, through which curiosity becomes wisdom through study.

This curiosity, this drive to know and understand more, is the one passion that defines the Dominican, and it is all consuming. "The life of the student - the intellectual life, as we call it - is by itself all-absorbing and exclusive. It will not even brook interference from the higher reaches of the soul - from the affective part, as we call it; and it cannot bear interruptions from the noisy world outside; it must not be distracted either from within or without"[17] St. Dominic spent hours reading scripture and contemplating its mysteries. Today, his descendants can do no less. To don the habit is to commit to a life of study, a development of the intellectual life, because it is only through this development that they can truly honor their founder, serve God's children, and grow in unity with God. This is our sacred duty. "So we are bound, in virtue of our doctrinal mission, to present every object of our teaching in the first place as *true;* and our own lives ought to be governed rather by the influence of the true than even by the attraction of the good, and our external activity should appear as principally directed towards the diffusion of light."[18]

The ultimate end of the intellectual life is wisdom. It is the realization that knowing God is why we were created, why we were given reason, why we are charged with being stewards of our earth and siblings. But it is also the realization that we came from dust and to dust we will return except for the Spirit that is breathed within us, giving us life, giving us the seed of eternal life (Gen 2:6-7). This realization, more than a simple acknowledgement of the words, but the realization of this is the beginning of true wisdom—we are but nothing without God. This is the kenotic moment; with the grace of God the Dominican should empty themselves before God to receive grace upon grace in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Spirituality

As our intellect grows through deliberate study, through dedicated time, so should our spirituality grow. Time before the Eucharist, time in silent prayer and meditation, and ultimately time contemplating the great mysteries of God. As we empty ourselves of ego, self, we make room for God to live in and through us. Thus, the telos of spirituality is *pleroma*. That is, the goal is to have the fullness of God to live within, even as we know no person can ever contain God's immensity. But, rather, their very selves radically transform so that it is God who lives within and through them and they are no longer what they once were. The path to this glorious end is prayer, meditation, and contemplation.

Where prayer is the recitation of formal texts, and meditation is the silent musing on an aspect of our Lord's life, roughly speaking, contemplation is about participating in the life of God. As such, it is grace acting on the person, drawing them closer to holiness. "No, Dominic realized that the life of contemplation is a gift, an invitation to share in the divine life of God, to which we are all called. It is a response to God's grace that is offered to each of us, uniquely and particularly. This calls for perseverance and regular discipline in prayer, as is required by Dominican life, but also the freedom to dive into that prayer as men and women uniquely created and called by God"[19]

It is certainly true that all progress in the spiritual life is given by God's grace. "Growth in the spiritual life comes about by responding to God's grace given in prayer"[20] And for all Christians the call is the same, "The whole of the

[15] Briscoe and Janczyk, *Saint Dominic's Way of Life: A Path to Knowing and Loving God*, 26.

[16] *Ibid.*, 27.

[17] Clerissac, *The Spirit of St. Dominic*, 11.

[18] *Ibid.*, 41.

[19] Briscoe and Janczyk, *Saint Dominic's Way of Life: A Path to Knowing and Loving God*, 67.

[20] *Ibid.*, 68.

Christian life is a preparation for this union with God, which is brought to perfection in the beatific vision in heaven" [21] Yet, for a Dominican there is an added dimension and definition. "For a Dominican, prayer can be categorized according to its three main settings. First, there is the public liturgical prayer, which includes the Mass and the Divine Office, accompanied by the Rosary. Second, there is meditation, or silent prayer. Sometimes we call this 'private' prayer, but it is often done at a common time in the chapel. And for Dominicans in particular, we have our sacred study, which, though not always mystical and rarely glamorous, is part of our prayer and contemplative life."[22] Please note, for a Dominican there can be no separation between sacred study (intellect) and the contemplative life to which we are called (spirituality). This is the essential core of what it means to be a Dominican.

Thus, the intellectual life, that curiosity that propels an ever-deepening study of Scripture feeds into and inspires greater depth of the spiritual life. The Dominican studies that they may know God better, love God more, and grow in unity with God more fully. Through *kenosis* we reach *pleroma*. But that cannot be the end of it, as Jesus has commanded us all not only to love our Lord and God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, but also to love our neighbor as ourselves. This final piece is essential for the Dominican Order as Dominicans are given the charism of bringing the Gospel to the four corners of the earth.

Evangelization

Evangelization is the outcome of the deep spirituality and intellectual life to which the Dominican is called. In other words, the study of Truth and the contemplation of Truth, leads to living that Truth, and sharing that Truth. It becomes the *way* in which Dominicans form relationships. The *way* they show true love. "Time and again Dominic's love for Christ, for the brethren, for his religious life, and for preaching defined and gave shape to his relationships. And as his sphere of influence began to grow, it shaped the *way* in which his friars and sisters would live the Dominican life" (Emphasis added).[23] Dominicans are called to a spiritual friendship that "originates in the common pursuit of Christ and of preaching the Gospel… that together, as brothers or as sisters, we arrive at that for which each of us is made: union with Christ, to worship and adore him together, with one heart and one mind"[24] Thus, unity in Christian friendship builds unity with Christ.

This is the charge and charism of the Dominican Order and it is also a call to evangelize the world. It is a call to bring this Truth wherever and whenever God so places one. All are brought to a time and place that first through their example and then through their words they can share the Truth and help people find their path to Christ. Preaching is the logical and necessary outcome of the intellectual and spiritual life, union with God, necessitates sharing God's love with others. We preach as an act of love. We preach to bring consolation to a weary world. We preach to bring God's justice, but above all we preach to bring God's loving mercy. "Men and women are broken and have their wounds and crosses. Any relationship, any friendship, is predicated on mercy – God's and our own"[25] This is the call, this is the nature, this is the responsibility, this is how Dominicans should follow Dominic's way of imitating Christ.

The end, then, of evangelization is *koinonia,* a divine calling to unity with God in communion within the Order, and then more broadly to God's children. The Dominican order, properly formed and lived, is a communal life where resources are shared in common. Today, that may have a new dimension given through the mediation of technology, but it is still a significant part of the calling. Dominicans are called to live the life they preach. To preach unity with God but to live in disunity does violence to the very fabric of the Order. Of course, modern tines present various challenges to this ideal, which makes living the ideal all the more important. This must be communicated and reinforced during formation, to which we now turn.

Maturing on the Path

While this writing is not meant to be a fully developed formation program, such would be redundant and presumptuous, it is meant to offer a focus based on the dispositions and dynamics discussed above. It must be clear and believed in the heart that being a Dominican requires deep study, fervent prayer, and spreading the Gospel. Therefore, Dominicans at every stage of perpet-

[21] *Ibid.*, 69.

[22] *Ibid.*, 67.

[23] *Ibid.*, 79.

[24] *Ibid.*, 81.

[25] *Ibid.*, 81.

ual formation must make time for these activities. One way of thinking about this is that there is no such thing as a fully formed Dominican, all are on the path, all are in perpetual formation, finding their *way*.

It is certainly true that in modern times Dominicans face new challenges. The frenetic energy of our times when one is expected to do more and more with fewer and fewer resources does not escape the monastery, even if the monastery is the home, a priory, or a local church. Praying the office in common is a challenge when an order is spread geographically and/or across time zones. To some degree this can be mitigated by technology. And it also means that local priors must be given great latitude in establishing rules and practices that conform to the Constitution of the Order.[26] The same is true of receiving the Holy Eucharist. Accommodation must be made without ever compromising the Order's call to community, to *koinonia.*

To create these spiritually mature Dominicans, formation must inculcate Dominic's example of unity of soul. Remember, again, the words of Jesus' Great Commandment, we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This is a call to unity, to love God properly requires the entire heart, mind, soul, and strength. No part of the individual can be withheld. To love God requires unity of soul and purpose. And St. Dominic was a great example of this *way* of life. "In St. Dominic equilibrium did not mean the neutralizing but the intensifying of the forces at work. His different qualities, controlled and brought under the sway of reason and grace, reached the absolute fullness of their natural and supernatural impetus."[27] The reason and grace needed to achieve this unity corresponds to the life of the intellect and the life of prayer.

Having said these preliminary words, it should be clear that formation is the function by which Dominicans grow in both unity and maturity across the intellectual, spiritual, and evangelical lives, the essence of the Dispositions and Dynamics Model. Full attention to the nature of the Dominican in question must be paid, each Dominican must be formed according to their nature, their gifts, their challenges. This implies a strong recruitment program, part of which is identifying where the subject is in terms of their maturity and unity, which, in turn, should shape the material substance of the formation.

There is no shortage of material for Dominican formation. One could derive a full program from the four texts cited here. The key is not what texts to use. The key is to identify where the individual is and where the order needs them to be, given time and place. Even if for exigent reasons the Order chooses to do away with the postulancy, the novitiate, and temporary vows. This must be based on the same rubric of maturity and unity in the intellectual and spiritual life of the individual. But in normal circumstances the postulant is vetted mostly for the desire to live such a life; the novice for the dispositions even if in early formation; the simple vows to the first row in our chart above, they must have consistent and sincere sacred studies, a devout prayer life, and the ability to teach and preach. Formation is about helping the Dominican move from one level to the other based on the need of the individual. Keeping in mind that formation is grace building on nature, maturity in the spiritual life must be approached from two perspectives. In addition to the academic formation the member is receiving, the member should be in spiritual direction or pastoral counseling.

Further, we do know from the example of St. Dominic that the study of Scripture is both the foundation and summit of intellectual and spiritual maturity. Therefore, any curriculum design must pair academic sources, like the four used in this article, with scriptural studies. This integration not only supports the intellectual growth needed to mature from knowledge, to understanding, to wisdom, it also helps build the unity between the intellectual and spiritual dispositions. This, in broad sketch, is a solid plan for formation for a new province that does not have the resources of an established order.

Broader Application

What we saw in the diagram above, what has been the main driver of this article, is the dispositions and dynamics that make for a great disciple of Jesus. For Dominicans that takes on a special character due to the example of St. Dominic; the history of the Order; the Rule of St. Augustine; and the Constitution of the Order, which should at least be a guide for all. However, as has been said repeatedly the call in and of itself is applicable more broadly to all who seek to be disciples of Christ.

The call to follow Christ as secular clergy, as Third Order Dominicans, or as lay people always requires at least an understanding of Scripture, meditative prayer, and to some the ability to proclaim the Gospel and to others the ability to bear Witness. The more Christians are educated in Scripture and taught proper prayer and meditation

[26] Constitution of the Order of Preachers, 2024: https://www.op.org/documents/#810-860-wpfd-1_lco-book-of-constitutions-and-ordinations-home-doc-en-5fbf8ea66d4ae

[27] Clerissac, *The Spirit of St. Dominic*, 10.

the holier our Church as a whole will be. Therefore, one objective of this approach to formation is also to produce Dominicans who can teach this method, albeit significantly modified, to others. Modifications can come in the form of length of training, sequence, depth of study, etc. What cannot be modified is the overall structure that calls for maturity and unity for that is what our Lord called us to be and what St. Dominic exemplified, as we have seen.

Conclusion

The "Dominican Way of Life" is ultimately a method for maturing the human person in the imitation of Christ. Through the foundational elements of the Rule of St. Augustine and the specific charisms of the Order, members develop a spirituality that is both contemplative and profoundly active. My findings suggest that the efficacy of this method lies in its "Grace of the Word"—the ability to speak *to* God or *about* God in a way that resonates with the real-world questions of those around us. Whether within the cloister or in the broader world, the Dominican approach offers a structured yet flexible path toward spiritual maturity and a life lived in service to the Gospel.

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John Henry Newman, Truth, and University Education in an Age of AI

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Abstract

This article argues that John Henry Newman remains a searching interlocutor for contemporary university education when he is read critically rather than nostalgically. It offers a Newmanian intervention in the philosophy of university education, with selective engagement in contemporary higher-education theory and public-reason debates rather than a full theology of the university. Through close reading of The Idea of a University*, and at key points* An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, it reconstructs four claims: a university presupposes the intelligibility of one reality under many aspects; truth is the norm of inquiry; liberal education forms judgment rather than merely distributing information; and theology can function within the university as a disciplined inquiry into ultimate questions. It then tests these claims against marketisation, AI-mediated learning, vocational reductionism, and procedural neutrality. Newman does not supply a nineteenth-century model ready for restoration. His social assumptions, institutional scale, and confessional setting require qualification, yet his deeper distinctions remain portable. They expose the reduction of education to measurable output, the confusion of fluent performance with understanding, and the temptation to treat pluralism as the suspension of truth. Newman's continuing importance lies in his insistence that university education concerns the formation of persons capable of responsible assent, proportionate judgment, and reality-oriented inquiry.*

Keywords: Newman, Truth, AI, Education

Universities are increasingly required to justify themselves in external and measurable terms. Their worth is cast in rankings, salaries, student satisfaction, research income, impact metrics, and labour-market value.[1] Generative AI intensifies an older confusion by making polished language easier to produce while leaving understanding uncertain. Across contemporary higher-education theory, the anxiety is therefore not only managerial but conceptual: the university risks forgetting what kind of institution it is, and losing its integrity as "institution of truth."[2]

This article addresses that problem primarily as a contribution to Newman studies and the philosophy of university education, drawing on contemporary higher-education theory only where it clarifies present conditions. It does not attempt a full theology of the university or a comprehensive survey of current university theory. Its claim is narrower: Newman still offers distinctions by which present confusions about truth, inquiry, judgment, and the scope of academic reason can be seen more clearly. That claim persuades only if Newman is read textually

[1] Readings, B., *The University in Ruins (*Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 5, 21-24; Collini, S., *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012), 1-11; Barnett, R., *Imagining the University* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1-5; Biesta, G. J. J., *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2016), 11-12.

[2] Rider, S., "Truth, Democracy and the Mission of the University," in *The Thinking University: A Philosophical Examination of Thought and Higher Education*, ed. Bengtsen, S. S. E. and Barnett, R., (Cham: Springer, 2018), 25; Bengtsen, S. S. E., Robinson, S., and Shumar, W., "Introduction - The University Becoming," in *The University Becoming: Perspectives from Philosophy and Social Theory*, ed. Bengtsen, S. S. E., Robinson, S., and Shumar, W., (Cham: Springer, 2021), 2-3.

and historically. *The Idea of a University*[3] emerged from the attempt to found a Catholic university in Dublin amid disputes about liberal education, denominational identity, and theology's place in modern intellectual life.[4] Newman neither wrote for a mass university system nor anticipated late-modern managerial governance, democratic access, deep pluralism, and digital mediation. Yet he asked with unusual sharpness what a university is for, what kind of intellectual formation it seeks, and what follows when one mode of knowledge quietly claims to measure the whole.

The argument proceeds in two movements. It first reconstructs Newman's account of the unity of knowledge, truth as the norm of inquiry, liberal education as the formation of a "philosophical habit," and theology's place within the circle of sciences. It then tests those claims against marketisation, AI-saturated learning, vocational reductionism, and secular neutrality. The point is not that Newman settles these debates, but that he provides a grammar for speaking, living, and judging truth within university education.

Reconstructing Newman

Historically Situated, Intellectually Portable

Any persuasive retrieval of Newman must begin with a concession. *The Idea of a University* is not a timeless treatise floating above history. It belongs to a distinct nineteenth-century setting shaped by post-Enlightenment disputes about reason and religion, increasing disciplinary specialisation, and Catholic efforts to imagine a university that could be intellectually serious without capitulating either to sectarian defensiveness or to reductive secularism.[5] That setting imposes real limits. Newman's educational idiom often carries assumptions about class, gender, and culture that cannot simply be transposed into contemporary democratic institutions. His university is not the late-modern research university with its bureaucratic apparatus, mixed public-private accountabilities, mass enrolment, and digital infrastructures. Nor can his defence of theology be detached from the Catholic intellectual project within which it was made.

Yet Newman should not be treated as a museum piece. His principles remain portable where they are most formal and least antiquarian: in his non-reductive account of disciplinary plurality, his insistence that inquiry is answerable to truth, his distinction between education and mere training, and his refusal to let successful methods harden into metaphysical monopolies. Read this way, Newman is not a blueprint for restoring a lost university but a critic of recurrent temptations: fragmentation without relation, utility without orientation, and a procedural neutrality that narrows reason while claiming to protect it.

Universal Knowledge, Truth, and the Philosophical Habit

Newman's point of departure is famous, but often flattened into a slogan. A university, he writes, is "a place of teaching universal knowledge."[6] Read crudely, this can suggest encyclopaedism, as if the university existed to accumulate everything or to produce students who know a little about everything. Newman's argument moves elsewhere. "Universal" does not mean exhaustive possession. It means relation, scope, and proportion. The sciences form a "circle" because the real is one, while inquiry approaches it under many aspects.[7]

His criticism of exclusion and reduction follows directly. Once a discipline forgets that it has abstracted one aspect of reality for a specific purpose, it can begin to treat its own method as exhaustive. Newman's example of political economy is telling: the problem is not that the economist studies wealth, but that the science of wealth may begin to speak as if it could decide what is finally worth pursuing.[8] At that point, a method becomes a

[3] In this paper, all references to *The Idea of a University* are to Newman, J. H., *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated*, 3rd ed. (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1873). Many scholars also cite the posthumous Longmans "New Impression": Newman, J. H., *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1891). For contemporary scholarly purposes, the principal critical edition remains Newman, J. H., *The Idea of a University*, ed. Ker, I. T., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). The Notre Dame edition, with introduction by Svaglic, M. J., is likewise valuable for its editorial materials: Newman, J. H., *The Idea of a University*, ed. Svaglic, M. J., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982). A further useful edition, especially for teaching and modern interpretation, is Newman, J. H., *The Idea of a University*, ed. Turner, F. M., (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

[4] Ker, I., *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 376-77; Turner, F. M., *John Henry Newman: The Challenge to Evangelical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 3-4.

[5] Newman, *Idea of a University*, 181-182.

[6] Newman, *Idea of a University*, ix, 20-21.

[7] Newman, *Idea of a University*, 45-47.

[8] Ibid., 87-89.

worldview. Newman's target is therefore not specialisation as such, but disproportion.

The educational fruit of resisting disproportion is what Newman calls the "philosophical habit." In one of the defining passages of *The Idea*, liberal education forms "a habit of mind" marked by "freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom."[9] Elsewhere he describes true "enlargement of mind" as "the power of viewing many things at once as one whole," placing each in due relation within "the universal system."[10] These formulations matter because they show that liberal education is not decorative breadth or genteel polish. It is intellectual formation in proportion. The educated person does not merely possess more information, but judges bearings, limits, and relative weight more adequately.

This is also why Newman's appeal to truth is more than pious ornament. He writes that intellectual cultivation secures "the sight of things as they are, or of truth, in opposition to fancy, opinion, and theory."[11] Truth here is neither infallible possession nor ideological certainty. It names the object to which inquiry is answerable. A university ordered to truth does not pretend to stand above history or conflict. It claims only that knowledge is measured by reality rather than by usefulness, preference, or rhetorical success. That is why the university remains a place of judgment rather than a machinery of credential distribution.

Contemporary suspicion toward universality is justified at one level. Too often the "universal" has concealed a privileged standpoint while pretending to speak from nowhere. Newman cannot be defended by ignoring that history. The better reading is chastened rather than triumphant. His universality is best read not as a finished totality but as a protest against fragmentation. Without some orientation toward relation, disciplinary plurality collapses into parallel monologues.

Theology and the Circle of Sciences

Newman's most controversial claim follows from the foregoing. If the university professes universal knowledge, and if theology concerns real truth-claims about God, the world, and human destiny, then theology's exclusion deforms the university's intellectual architecture. His syllogism is blunt: a university professes to teach universal knowledge; theology is "a branch of knowledge." Therefore, a university that excludes theology either denies that theology is knowledge or ceases to be what it claims.[12]

What matters is not only the conclusion but the form of the argument. Newman is not merely asking that religion be granted cultural respectability. He is making an epistemic claim. Theology matters because questions of origin, end, moral order, and relation to God are not dissolved by empirical success elsewhere. Excluding theology tends instead to produce a vacuum into which other disciplines expand beyond their competence. Newman's warning about a science being made "the centre of all truth" is therefore not anti-scientific complaint but a caution against explanatory imperialism.[13]

For that reason, theology's role in the university is not negative but positively enlarges the university's field of vision. It keeps open questions that empirical and technical disciplines frequently presuppose but cannot settle: whether reality is intelligible as more than mechanism, whether human agency is reducible to function, whether moral obligation is merely constructed, and whether final ends can be treated as intellectually serious objects of reflection. Theology does not compete with chemistry, economics, or sociology on their own terrain. It asks what account of the whole is being implied when those disciplines move from method to metaphysics.

Still, Newman is persuasive only if an essential distinction is maintained. Theology as a university discipline is not identical with confessional control. A university need not require religious adherence in order to host theology as a public discipline. Theology becomes academic precisely by being arguable, criticisable, historically responsible, and answerable to standards of reasoning and evidence. Newman's claim is thus sharper than either confessional dominance or secular exclusion: theology belongs in the university not because criticism must stop, but because ultimate questions are too important to be ruled inadmissible in advance.[14] Here selective engagement with contemporary interlocutors clarifies rather than displaces Newman. Liberal accounts of public reason rightly resist coercion and confessional privilege within shared institu-

[9] Ibid., 101-2.

[10] Ibid., 137.

[11] Ibid., 180.

[12] Ibid., 20-22.

[13] Ibid., 72-74, 89; Newman, J. H., *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 344.

[14] Newman, *Idea of a University*, 54, 61.

tions.[15] Yet it does not follow that theological reasoning must be excluded from a university curriculum. As Ford and van den Brink argue in different ways, theology can function publicly within the modern university when it is treated as a disciplined inquiry rather than a protected enclave.[16] Newman's contribution is not to defeat pluralism but to deepen it. A plural university need not suspend questions of truth; it must learn to stage their contestation without coercion.

Newman and the Contemporary University

Marketisation, Audit, and the Eclipse of Ends

Newman is often invoked against marketisation, but the force of his criticism is not nostalgia for a pre-modern academy. It is conceptual. Readings famously diagnosed the contemporary university's reliance on the empty prestige term "excellence," while Barnett and Biesta, in different registers, insist that educational institutions cannot evade prior questions of purpose.[17] Newman sharpens this criticism by showing why instrumental narrowing is not merely regrettable but deformative.

If the university loses sight of truth as the norm of inquiry, it may still describe outputs, efficiencies, and measurable impacts. What it cannot explain is why these matter, how they are ordered, or what kind of persons and judgments they should serve.[18] Metrics are not false because they are measurable; they become distorting when they displace rather than serve the university's ends. Newman's language of relation and proportion is useful here. Practical goods become destructive when they are detached from a wider account of knowledge, reality, and judgment.

In this respect, Newman remains an uneasy ally of critiques of audit culture. He does not license a romantic disdain for practical accountability. Order, standards, examinations, accreditation, and demonstrable competence are legitimate and necessary elements of university life. A university must be responsibly governed, publicly answerable, and able to show that its work is substantive. Yet Newman denies that such mechanisms are sufficient or ultimate. Universities may serve labour markets, professions, and economic life, but when these functions become definitive, they hollow out the deeper formation that alone makes such service humane and enduring.

Generative AI, Epistemic Outsourcing, and the Judgment of the Learner

The age of generative AI makes Newman's emphasis on judgment newly urgent. Recent literature on AI in higher education repeatedly warns that the issue is not only cheating in a narrow procedural sense. Generative systems alter the conditions under which students write, reason, and present knowledge.[19] The deepest danger is not simply false authorship, but the growing plausibility of fluent work detached from understanding.

Here *The Idea of a University* should be read together with *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. In the latter, Newman insists that "it is the mind that reasons, and that controls its own reasonings," and he names the perfected power of judging and concluding the "Illative Sense."[20] This does not signify a vague intuition or an irrational leap. Rather, it names the mind's trained capacity to discern when multiple probabilities, each insufficient on its own, converge with enough coherence and cumulative force to justify assent and yield certitude in concrete matters. Where probabilities genuinely diverge, however, certitude is not yet warranted. In such cases, judgment must test whether the contrary considerations can be integrated, outweighed, or shown to be only apparent difficulties rather than true counter-evidence.[21] The point is highly relevant to AI-mediated learning because it identifies

[15] Rawls, J., *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 5-7, 212-54.

[16] Ford, D. F., "The Future of Theology at a Public University," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): a1807; van den Brink, G., "The Future of Theology at Public Universities," *In die Skriflig* 54, no. 2 (2020): 1-9.

[17] Readings, *University in Ruins*, 21-24; Barnett, *Imagining the University*, 1-3; Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*, 33-47.

[18] Bengtsen, Robinson, and Shumar, "Introduction - The University Becoming," 3.

[19] Bearman, M., Ryan, J., and Ajjawi, R., "Discourses of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: A Critical Literature Review," *Higher Education* 86 (2023): 369-85; Lindebaum, D., et al., "The Transformation of Epistemic Agency and Governance in Higher Education through Large Language Models: Toward a Future of Organized Immaturity," *Organization Studies* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406251392002.

[20] Newman, J. H., *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns, Oates, and Co., 1874), 353-54.

[21] Newman compares the illative sense to Aristotle's *phronēsis* as an acquired habit of right judgment in concrete matters, while also qualifying the analogy: neither is a merely formal method, and both are exercised in particular domains rather than as one abstract, universally uniform faculty. Thus the illative sense names not a rule-bound technique of inference, but a cultivated personal capacity for sound judgment. See Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 353-56.

judgment as a personal act rather than a formal manipulation of propositions. Reasoning, in concrete matters, does not consist in producing correct-looking discourse but in weighing, integrating, and assenting responsibly.

This distinction clarifies three AI-related problems. First, large language models produce simulated understanding. They generate persuasive prose without personal apprehension, struggle, or responsibility for truth. Second, they encourage epistemic outsourcing. Automation research long ago showed how readily humans over-trust systems that reduce effort and cognitive load; in education this becomes the temptation to accept summaries, explanations, and arguments because they are fast, coherent, and stylistically confident.[22] Third, they destabilise assessment. Detection is unreliable, and traditional take-home prose can no longer serve as a stable proxy for understanding.[23]

Newman does not offer a policy manual, but he does offer a criterion: assessment should make judgment visible. That is why current work on assessment redesign is more promising than fantasies of perfect detection. Corbin and colleagues, together with assessment reform work convened for the Australian sector, stress staged tasks, oral defence, supervised checkpoints, explanation of process, and visible decision-making.[24] These are not merely tactical responses to cheating. They restore what Newman would recognise as the learner's owned act of judgment. His relevance to AI is therefore not antiquarian. He helps identify what education must preserve when language can be manufactured at scale.

Vocationalism and the Difference Between Formation and Training

Universities are also pressed to justify themselves in vocational terms. Students face real economic pressure, institutions must demonstrate employability, and employers seek adaptable graduates for unstable labour markets. Newman is sometimes caricatured as indifferent to such realities. That is inaccurate. His distinction is not between useful and useless education, but between formation and reduction.

One of the most important passages in *The Idea* makes this explicit. Knowledge, Newman says, is not merely "an extrinsic or accidental advantage" that one can borrow, carry about, and exchange; it is "an acquired illumination," "a habit," and "a personal possession."[25] The contrast is not between thinking and doing, but between education that transforms the mind and training that remains external to it. Newman can therefore acknowledge that trades, techniques, and professional skills have their place while still arguing that they do not by themselves amount to university education.[26]

Contemporary evidence makes his point more rather than less plausible. The World Economic Forum's latest labour-market analysis stresses rapid skill disruption and the need for adaptability rather than narrow once-for-all competence.[27] Research on employability likewise suggests that initiative, judgment, creativity, and intellectual flexibility matter alongside immediate technical preparation.[28] Newman's realism lies here: universities serve practical life best when they refuse to become instruments of short-term utility. They prepare students for work by forming powers that travel across roles and across time.

[22] Parasuraman, R., and Riley, V., "Humans and Automation: Use, Misuse, Disuse, Abuse," *Human Factors* 39, no. 2 (1997): 230-53; Johnston, H., et al., "Student Perspectives on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Technologies in Higher Education," *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 20 (2024): 2; Gruenhagen, J. H., et al., "The Rapid Rise of Generative AI and Its Implications for Academic Integrity: Students' Perceptions and Use of Chatbots for Assistance with Assessments," *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* 6 (2024): 100273.

[23] Fleckenstein, J., et al., "Do Teachers Spot AI? Evaluating the Detectability of AI-Generated Texts among Student Essays," *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* 6 (2024): 100209; Corbin, T., et al., "On the Essay in a Time of GenAI," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 58, no. 3 (2026): 198-210.

[24] Corbin, T., et al., "The Wicked Problem of AI and Assessment," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* (2025): 1-17; Lodge, J., et al., *Assessment Reform for the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (Australia: Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2023).

[25] Newman, *Idea of a University*, 113.

[26] Ibid., 113-14, 121.

[27] World Economic Forum, *Future of Jobs Report 2025* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2025).

[28] Hooley, T. J., Bennett, D., and Knight, E. B., "Rationalities That Underpin Employability Provision in Higher Education across Eight Countries," *Higher Education* 86, no. 5 (2023): 1003-23; Kovačević, M., Dekker, T., and van der Velden, R., "Employability Development in Undergraduate Programmes: How Different Is Liberal Arts Education?" *Teaching in Higher Education* 29, no. 8 (2024): 2184-2204.

Neutrality, Pluralism, and Final Ends

A final pressure concerns secular neutrality. Procedural neutrality has genuine value insofar as it protects institutions from coercion and confessional capture. Yet when neutrality hardens into an incapacity to speak about truth, the good, or final ends, it ceases to protect plural inquiry and begins to thin it. The university becomes articulate about methods and management while embarrassed by the question of what education is for. Newman helps expose the false comfort of that arrangement. His point is not that universities should become confessional, but that pluralism becomes intellectually superficial when ultimate questions are treated as administratively inconvenient.[29] Institutional non-establishment need not imply curricular abstinence about ultimacy. A university may remain public and plural while still allowing philosophy, theology, and related disciplines to argue about truth, human ends, and the shape of a life well lived.

That point matters for the present issue's concern with speaking, living, and judging the truth. Universities do not judge truth only by issuing propositions. They judge it in the range of questions they permit, the disciplines they legitimise, the forms of reasoning they reward, and the habits of attention they cultivate. A university that excludes ultimate questions in advance has already made a substantive judgment about reality while claiming merely to keep the peace. Newman's lasting contribution is to show that a more serious pluralism is possible: one that accepts contestation without reducing truth to private preference.

Conclusion

Newman's educational thought remains valuable not as a nineteenth-century programme to be restored, but as a set of distinctions capable of disciplining contemporary debate. Close reading of *The Idea of a University* shows that "universal knowledge" does not imply encyclopaedic mastery, but a rightly ordered apprehension of relations and proportions; that truth is not an ideological possession, but the norm to which inquiry remains answerable; that liberal education forms a philosophical habit of mind capable of judgment; and that theology, rightly understood, enlarges rather than constricts the university's intellectual horizon. These distinctions are not antiquarian. They remain practically consequential for diagnosing the deformities of the contemporary university.

In Newman's sense, this paper has argued that, within the present crisis of higher education, what is most at risk is not simply curricular balance or institutional ethos, but the very labour of intellectual formation: the cultivation of judgment, the ordering of knowledge to truth, and the education of persons capable of responsible assent. By the same cumulative reasoning, it has also shown that Newman's account continues to illuminate the path of remedy. His thought makes clear why the university must resist being reduced to employability, information delivery, or procedural accountability alone, while still assigning to practical preparation, public responsibility, and institutional discipline their proper and necessary place.

Newman's enduring contribution, then, is not nostalgia but judgment. He reminds us that university education concerns the formation of persons capable of proportionate reasoning, responsible assent, and reality-oriented inquiry. In an age tempted to mistake fluency for understanding, measurement for meaning, and management for wisdom, Newman's educational philosophy still identifies the university's task with unusual precision: *Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*.[30]

[29] Newman, *Idea of a University*, pp. 28, 61, 69–70.

[30] The motto on his grave, means: "Out of shadows and images into the truth."

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READINGS, B., *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

RIDER, S., "Truth, Democracy and the Mission of the University." In *The Thinking University: A Philosophical Examination of Thought and Higher Education*, edited by Bengtsen, S. S. E. and Barnett, R., 15-29. Cham: Springer, 2018.

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Towards a Criterion Based Understanding of Gossip

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Abstract

This paper presents a criterion-based approach to discuss the procedural elements of gossip and explore its normative implications. It highlights gossip's dual nature, showing how it can either promote social cohesion or result in moral disintegration, depending on intent and context. It is demonstrated that the moral weight of gossip is context-sensitive, shaped by both its structural process and ethical outcomes. By providing a nuanced, interdisciplinary perspective, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in theology, philosophy, and business ethics. Methodologically, it pays attention to dictionary definitions of gossip, crystallizes key criteria for identifying it, and distinguishes between its procedural and normative dimensions. The paper further emphasizes gossip's role in moral judgment, its influence on community cohesion, and its impact on individual reputations. Finally, the paper reveals the tension between procedural and normative understandings, suggesting that even the structural elements of gossip carry implicit moral significance. With practical implications for organizational settings, the paper demonstrates how the effects of gossip depend on intent, context, and consequences.

Key words: Gossip, Moral Judgment, Procedural criterion, Normative criterion

Frequently overlooked as mere triviality, gossip exerts profound influence on human social dynamics,[1] and is usually evaluative.[2] It functions as a subtle yet potent force in shaping moral judgment and collective behavior, with religious motivations and ethical frameworks playing a critical role in distinguishing between its harmful and constructive forms. As such, gossip has become a focal point of inquiry across moral-centered disciplines like philosophy, theology, and business ethics, each offering valuable insights into its impact on behavior, relationships, and ethical decision-making. Given the vast scope of these fields and the numerous studies published, we focus here solely on the aspect most relevant to our discussion, guided by dictionary definitions. This, in fact, represents our methodological contribution to the interdisciplinary discourse on gossip.

Scholars have noted that gossip frequently centers around themes of love, wrongdoing, and personal gain, reflecting deeper questions about morality and human behavior.[3] Judgment, a fundamental trait of the human person, shapes how actions – such as gossip – are evaluated through the distinct insights offered by, for instance, philosophy, theology, and business ethics. Concerning gossip, philosophy explores the nature of truth and ethical dilemmas.[4] In theology, the focus is mainly on the communal

[1] Baumeister, R. F., Zhang, L., Vohs, K. D., "Gossip as cultural learning," *Review of General Psychology 8,* no. 2 (2004): 111–121; Ellwardt, L., Steglich, C., Wittek, R., "The co-evolution of gossip and friendship in workplace social networks," *Social Networks 34,* no. 4 (2012): 623-633.

[2] Holland, M. G., "What's wrong with telling the truth? An analysis of gossip," *American Philosophical Quarterly 33,* no. 2 (1996): 197-209.

[3] Auden, W. H., "In Defense of Gossip," *The Living Age*, February 1, (1938): 534-538; Adkins, K., *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2017).

[4] Kauffeld, F. J., Fields, J. E., *The presumption of veracity in testimony and gossip* (University of Windsor, 2003); Epstein, J., *Gossip: The untrivial pursuit* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011); Wu, J., Számádo, S., Barclay, P., Beersma, B., Dores Cruz, T. D., Lo Iacono, S.,

aspects and consequences of gossip,[5] whereas business ethics and organizational literature studies the effects of gossip on organizational culture and power dynamics.[6] Integrating these perspectives into a criterion-based approach offers a nuanced understanding of gossip as both a social mechanism and a moral issue. Furthermore, these interdisciplinary insights reveal how individuals form moral judgments that transcend professional settings, drawing on ethical, social, and spiritual frameworks.

Although gossip is often understood intuitively, efforts to define it reveal significant inconsistencies across scholarly literature and everyday usage. To address these discrepancies, this paper brings together theoretical interdisciplinary perspectives with how gossip is framed in dictionaries and lexicons. These sources not only capture linguistic and cultural attitudes and moral assumptions but also offer insights into how gossip is perceived across various contexts. Analyzing language use is essential for establishing the criteria of gossip, as it uncovers implicit power dynamics and social intentions embedded in communication, helping to differentiate between casual conversation and morally significant discourse. Additionally, examining dictionary definitions provides a baseline for assessing the procedural and normative aspects of gossip, laying the groundwork for a criterion-based discussion to clarify conceptual ambiguities. Our focus is on English language dictionaries, as they capture the common understanding and usage of terms. Furthermore, relevant insights from theology, philosophy, and business ethics are incorporated to enrich the discussion. Given the variability in definitions, this paper adopts a criterion-based approach to refine the concept of gossip. Analyzing these definitions helps trace shifts in moral judgments and social roles, enhancing our conceptual framework and situating gossip's function as social capital across theological, philosophical, and business ethics contexts. This approach aims to identify the procedural criteria for gossip and address the dilemmas that arise from these criteria.

Some approaches to gossip

Gossip has been recognized as a fundamentally social process, reflecting the shared group identities and connections between the sender and receiver.[7] It serves as discreet indiscretion,[8] a potent form of social capital,[9] and a form of social behavior.[10] Gossip also operates as informal currency that shapes relationships[11] and impacts power structures and community cohesion. For instance, gossip can affect an individual's faith and ministry within a church, functioning as both prophecy and profanity.[12]

Nieper, A. S., Peters, K., Przepiorka, W., Tiokhin, L., Van Lange, P. A. M., "Honesty and dishonesty in gossip strategies: a fitness interdependence analysis." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, 376.*1838. (2021): 20200300.

[5] Botha, P. J. J., "Paul and gossip: a social mechanism in early Christian communities," *Neotestamentica 32,* no. 2 (1998): 267-288; Renner, S. S., *Godly gossip: The positive power to connect and encourage God's people.* PhD thesis. (United Theological Seminary, 2004); Daniels, J. W., "Gossip in John's Gospel and the social processing of Jesus' identity," *Journal of Early Christian History 1,* no. 2 (2011): 9-29; Campbell, R. *Church gossip: prophecy or profanity: how is one's faith and/or ministry affected by church gossip?* (MDiv thesis Church Gossip: Prophecy or Profanity (smu.ca), 2014).

[6] Kurland, N. B. & Pelled, L. H., "Passing the Word: Toward a Model of Gossip & Power in the Workplace," *The Academy of Management Review 25,* no. 2 (2000): 428-438; Ernst, S. From Blame Gossip to Praise Gossip? Gender, Leadership and Organizational Change, *The European Journal of Women's Studies 10,* no. 3 (2003): 277-299; Houmanfar, R. Johnson, R., "Organizational implications of gossip and rumor," *Journal of organizational behavior management 23,* no. 2-3 (2004): 117-138; Farley, S., "Is gossip power? The inverse relationship between gossip, power, and likability," *European Journal of Social Psychology 41,* no. 5 (2011): 574–579; Martinescu, E., Janssen, O., Nijstad, B. A., "Gossip as a resource: How and why power relationships shape gossip behavior," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 153* (2019): 89-102; Ribarsky, E., Hammonds, J., "Gossiping for the Good of It? Examining the Ling between Gossip and Organizational Socialization," *Kentucky Journal of Communication 38,* no. 1 (2019): 28; Tan, N., Yam, K.C., Zhang, P., (2021). Are You Gossiping About Me? The Costs and Benefits of High Workplace Gossip Prevalence. *J. Bus. Psychol. 36* (2021): 417-434; Waddington, K., "Theorising Organisational Compassion: Could Gossip Help?" in Wu, J., Számádo, S., Barclay, P., Beersma, B., Dores Cruz, T.D., Lo Iacono, S., Nieper, A.S., Peters, K., Przepiorka, W., Tiokhin, L., Van Lange, P. A. M., Honesty and dishonesty in gossip strategies: a fitness interdependence analysis. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, 376.*1838 (2021), 20200300.

[7] Rysman, A.R., "Gossip and Occupational Ideology," *Journal of Communication 26,* no. 3 (1976): 64-68.

[8] Bergmann, J.R., *Discreet indiscretions: The social organization of gossip*. (Aldine de Gruyter, New York, 1993).

[9] Hafen, S., "Organizational Gossip: A Revolving Door of Regulation & Resistance," *Southern Communication Journal 69,* no. 3 (2004): 223-240

[10] Feinberg, M., Willer, R., Stellar, J., Keltner, D., "The virtues of gossip: reputational information sharing as prosocial behavior," *Journal of personality and social psychology 102,* no. 5 (2012): 1015.

[11] Shallcross, L., Ramsay, S., Barker, M., "The power of malicious gossip," *Australian Journal of Communication 38,* no. 1 (2011): 45-68.

[12] Campbell, R., *Church gossip: prophecy or profanity: how is one's faith and/or ministry affected by church gossip?* (MDiv thesis, 2014) Church Gossip: Prophecy or Profanity (smu.ca)

Its presence extends across informal gatherings inside and outside formal organizational frameworks. Broadly defined as informal evaluative talk about absent others,[13] gossip is viewed as a burdened virtue[14] and has implications for workplace friendships.[15] It has been discussed within moral philosophy[16] and analyzed in relation to moral foundations[17] and epistemology.[18] As social capital, gossip can uphold the moral order or serve as an agent of moral disintegration, depending on whether it aligns with the common good.

A theological point of view

From a theological perspective, gossip raises fundamental questions about community, trust, and morality.[19] The Bible warns against evil speech,[20] and theological analyses emphasize gossip's potential to disrupt or inform communal life. For instance, Rohrbaugh[21] identifies three types of New Testament texts related to gossip: those addressing the concept of gossip itself, those reporting instances of gossip, and those embodying gossip in their narrative.[22] In theology, discussions about gossip intersect with the dynamics of moral responsibility and social cohesion.[23] Many religious traditions view gossip with caution or outright condemnation, regarding it as a vice that can harm both individuals and the moral fabric of communities.[24] However, theology also acknowledges gossip's role in reinforcing communal bonds by transmitting shared values, norms, and beliefs.[25] The role of gossip and humor in the practice of becoming an intimate of Jesus has also received scholarly attention.[26] Although gossip is often associated with moral failure, it can serve as a form of collective moral judgment, raising questions about justice, grace, and human agency in a world governed by divine law.[27]

A philosophical point of view

Philosophically speaking, gossip is part of discussions about ethical questions regarding human communication and its relation to the epistemological and metaphysical aspects.[28] It reflects debates about whether gossip signifies human fallibility, social skill, or an instrument of justice. In this sense, gossip is not merely a social act but an existential one, expressing humanity's search for meaning and belonging in a world where knowledge is both power and vulnerability. Gossip also challenges established concepts of knowledge, power, and ethics by blurring the line be-

[13] Giardini, F., Wittek, R., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of gossip and reputation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[14] Alfano, M., Robinson, B., "Gossip as a burdened virtue," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice 20* (2017): 473-487.

[15] Ellwardt, L., Steglich, C., Wittek, R., "The co-evolution of gossip and friendship in workplace social networks,," *Social networks 34,* no. 4 (2012): 623-633.

[16] Fabre. C., "The Morality of Gossip: A Kantian Account," *Ethics 134,* no. 1 (2023): 32-56.

[17] Fernandes, S., Kappor, H., Karandikar, S., "Do We Gossip for Moral Reasons? The Intersection of Moral Foundations and Gossip,," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology 39* (2017): 218-238.

[18] Bertolotti, T., Magnani, L., "An epistemological analysis of gossip and gossip-based knowledge," *Synthese 191,* no. 17 (2014): 4037-4067.

[19] Meng, M., "Gossip: Killing Us Softly," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review 109* (2008): 26–31.

[20] Morey, R. A., *A Bible Handbook on Slander and Gossip*, (Millerstown: Christian Scholars Press, 2009).

[21] Rohrbaugh, R. L., "Gossip in the New Testament," in Pilch, J. J., ed., *Social scientific models for interpreting the Bible: Essays in the Context group in honor of Bruce J. Malina* (Brill, Leiden, 2001): 239-259.

[22] Van Eck, E., "Invitations and excuses that are not invitations and excuses: Gossip in Luke 14:18-20,," *Herv. Teol. Stud. 68*, no. 1 (2012): Online edition: v68n1a82.pdf (scielo.org.za); Daniels, J. W., "Gossip in John's Gospel and the social processing of Jesus' identity," *Journal of Early Christian History 1,* no. 2 (2011): 9-29.

[23] Botha, P. J. J., "Paul and gossip: a social mechanism in early Christian communities," *Neotestamentica 32,* no. 2 (1998): 267-288.

[24] Hashmi, S. D., Khan, K., Ullah, I., Gulzar, S., Haider, A., "Religion can change intentions: Interactive effect of abusive supervision and Islamic work ethics on workplace gossip,," *Journal of Islamic Business and Management 9,* no. 1 (2019): 160-175.
Cohen, Y., Enayat, H., (2023). "Communication in Judaism and Islam," in: Cohen, Y., Enayat, H., eds., *The Handbook on Religion and Communication* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2023): 83-98; Ibrahim, H. A., Alaw, B. M., "Backbiting, Gossip and Slander in Judaism and Islam – a comparative study,," *Sorra Man Ra'a 19,* no. 78 (2023): 138-156.

[25] Esler, P. F., "All That You Have Done… Has Been Fully Told to Me : The Power of Gossip and the Story of Ruth,," *Journal of Biblical Literature 137,* no. 3 (2018): 645-666.

[26] Capps, D., "Gossip, Humor, and the Art of Becoming an Intimate of Jesus" *Journal of Religion and Health 51* (2011):99-117.

[27] Morey, R. A., *A Bible Handbook on Slander and Gossip*, (Millerstown: Christian Scholars Press, 2009).

[28] Bertolotti, T., Magnani, L., "An epistemological analysis of gossip and gossip-based knowledge," *Synthese 191,* no. 17 (2014): 4037-4067.

tween truth and interpretation,[29] and can sometimes be morally acceptable.[30] It operates in the grey area between factual knowledge and subjective meaning, complicating moral evaluations. The philosophy of religion extends these reflections by situating gossip within the discourse of theodicy – the justification of God's goodness in the face of human suffering.[31] Through this lens, gossip embodies the tension between truth and social cohesion: although it may spread unverified information, it helps individuals navigate their social worlds, providing a way to evaluate others and establish moral boundaries. Philosophy thus illuminates the epistemological challenges and moral ambiguities inherent in gossip, underscoring how informal communication shapes ethical judgments.

A business ethics point of view

Business ethics offers a practical lens for understanding gossip, particularly in the workplace.[32] Namely, gossip serves as a tool for navigating power dynamics, influencing reputations, and fostering informal communication networks critical for collaboration.[33] However, gossip carries significant ethical risks. It can quickly become backbiting or defamation, undermining trust, damaging relationships, and creating toxic work environments.[34] On the other hand, research suggests that gossip can have positive effects, such as improving communication and helping employees grasp unwritten organizational rules.[35] Depending on its use, gossip may contribute to a transparent and cohesive workplace culture or act as a destructive force that erodes trust and collaboration. As a form of social capital, gossip offers individuals a way to navigate professional dynamics, shape reputations, and influence decision-making processes. However, these benefits raise ethical concerns. Is it moral to use gossip for personal gain or corporate advancement? As evident from the literature, some ethical frameworks criticize workplace gossip as inherently divisive, while others recognize it as a pragmatic tool for managing relationships in complex organizations. With this groundwork in place, the discussion now turns to the criteria necessary for a better understanding of gossip.

Criteria for gossip

We see that gossip is intuitively relatively easy to grasp, but defining it precisely reveals major differences, making it hard to find agreement. Now, we outline some of these discrepancies, acknowledging that the proposed standards may not be universally accepted.

The allegedly procedural criterion of gossip

Allegedly procedural elements of gossip:

(a) a talk (sometimes rumor if it includes facts and events, but also persons, or idle talk/small talk if it includes irrelevant matters about persons),
(b) between at least two persons,
(c) about a third person,
(d) who is absent during the talk (and did not give the permission to talk about it in its absence),
(e) about the third person's personal or private affairs
(f) for which participants in the conversation lack evidence

Normative element:

(g) in a way that the talk is negative of a person, false, and includes lying, or inventing facts (humbug, bullshit) about the person (see Figure 1).

[29] Holland, M. G., "What's wrong with telling the truth? An analysis of gossip," *American Philosophical Quarterly 33,* no. 2 (1996): 197-209.

[30] Westacott, E., "The ethics of gossiping," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy 14,* no. 1 (2000): 65-90.

[31] Parker, A. N., "An the word became…gossip? Unhinging the Samaritan woman in the age of #MeToo," *Review & Expositor 117,* no. 2 (2020): 259-271.

[32] Grote, J., *Clever as serpents : Business ethics and office politics* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997); Tassiello, V., Lombardi, S., Costabile, M., "Are we truly wicked when gossiping at work? The role of valence, interpersonal closeness and social awareness,," *Journal of Business Research 84* (2018): 141-149.

[33] Tan, N., Yam, K. C., Zhang, P., "Are You Gossiping About Me? The Costs and Benefits of High Workplace Gossip Prevalence,," *J. Bus. Psychol. 36* (2021): 417-434; Song, Y., *Gossiping About the Supervisors: Antecedents and Consequences of Workplace Gossip*, PhD thesis (School of Management, College of Business and Law, RMIT University, 2022); De Clercq, D., "Exposure to workplace bullying and negative gossip behaviors: Buffering roles of personal and contextual resources,," *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility 31,* no. 3 (2022): 859-874.

[34] Waddington, K., "Theorising Organisational Compassion: Could Gossip Help?," in: Wu, J., Számádo, S., Barclay, P., Beersma, B., Dores Cruz, T. D., Lo Iacono, S., Nieper, A. S., Peters, K., Przepiorka, W., Tiokhin, L., Van Lange, P. A. M., "Honesty and dishonesty in gossip strategies: a fitness interdependence analysis," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, 376.* 1838 (2024): 20200300.

[35] Dai, Y., Zhuo, X., Hou, J., Lyu, B., "Is not workplace gossip bad? The effective of positive workplace gossip on employee innovative behavior,," *Frontiers in Psychology 13* (2022): 1-12.

Conditions (a) to (g) are implicit or explicitly mentioned in the majority of the dictionary definitions given hereafter, and in length discussed in scholarship.[36] However, this particular analysis is of our own device. Condition (a) is important because other types of communication can, though not always, fall under the criterion of gossip. For example, imagine one person silently shows another a manipulated photo of a third (absent) person, with no evidence to confirm whether the photo is manipulated or not. This act involves some form of communication, but it is not gossip. Condition (b) is also important because no one can gossip alone – it takes at least two people, or more. Condition (c) matters because if two people are talking, for example, about an event rather than a person, without evidence, it is not gossip but rather a rumor. Condition (d) is crucial because if the person being discussed is present, it becomes a discussion rather than gossip. Condition (e) or condition of privacy, is important because if the topic concerns something public about an absent person, it isn't gossip but a form of public discourse, even if two people are discussing an absent third person. Finally, condition (f) is also significant because if evidence is available to the people engaging in gossip, the issue shifts to matters of belief, truth, or the justification of a statement or proposition. In short, it seems that each of the conditions (a – f) is necessary but insufficient on its own. When all the conditions are met together (i.e., when they are satisfied in conjunction), they become sufficient. However, they are not universally accepted and the variety of definitions exists:

Various dictionary definitions of gossip:

Concerning the criterion (a–f) dictionary definitions aren't clear about it. Let us give few examples.

(CAM) "Conversation or reports about other people's private lives that might be unkind, disapproving, or not true" (Cambridge Dictionary, URL: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/gossip),

(OXF) "informal talk or stories about other people's private lives, which may be unkind or not true" (Oxford Dictionary, URL: https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/gossip_1),

(MWEB) "A person who habitually reveals personal or sensational facts about others, a rumor or report of an intimate nature" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, URL: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gossip),

(COLL) "Informal conversation, often about other people's private affairs" (…) "casual and idle chat

a conversation involving malicious chatter or rumors about other people" (Collins Dictionary, URL: https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/gossip),

(LONG) "information that is passed from one person to another about other people's behaviour and private lives, often including unkind or untrue remarks" (Longman Dictionary, URL: https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/gossip),

(BRIT) "Information about the behavior and personal lives of other people" (…) "to talk about the personal lives of other people" (Britannica, URL: https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/gossip),

(FREE) "Rumor or talk of a personal, sensational, or intimate nature. A person who habitually spreads intimate or private rumors or facts. Trivial, chatty talk or writing." (Free Dictionary, URL: https://www.thefreedictionary.com/gossip),

These seven definitions seem to be sufficient in order to show the problem with the definition of gossip. We will present it in the following table.

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)
(CAM)	+	+	+	implied	+	+	+
(OXF)	+	+	+	implied	+	+	+
(MWEB)	+	+	+	implied	+	–	–
(COLL)	+	+	+	implied	+	–	+
(LONG)	+	+	+	implied	+	+	+
(BRIT)	+	+	+	implied	+	–	–
(FREE)	+	+	+	implied	+	–	–

Dictionaries do not agree on the definition of gossip. They agree on conditions from (a) to (e), but they disagree on conditions (f) and (g), while (g) being morally negative property of a gossip. The lack of evidence (f) is mentioned or implied in 3 definitions, but not in 4 of them. Immorality of gossip (g) is mentioned in 4, but not in 3 definitions.

Therefore, one could say that even on the level of dictionary definitions of gossip there is at least a hint of potential problem, namely, the problem of talking without any evidence whatsoever (condition f), and the problem of immoral nature of gossip (condition g). Hereafter we will suggest that similar problem reappears in the scientific literature on gossip.

[36] Foster, E. K., "Research on gossip: Taxonomy, methods, and future directions," *Review of General Psychology 8,* no. 2 (2004): 78–99.

The problem of dictionary definitions of gossip can be presented in the following diagram (as shown in Figure 1).

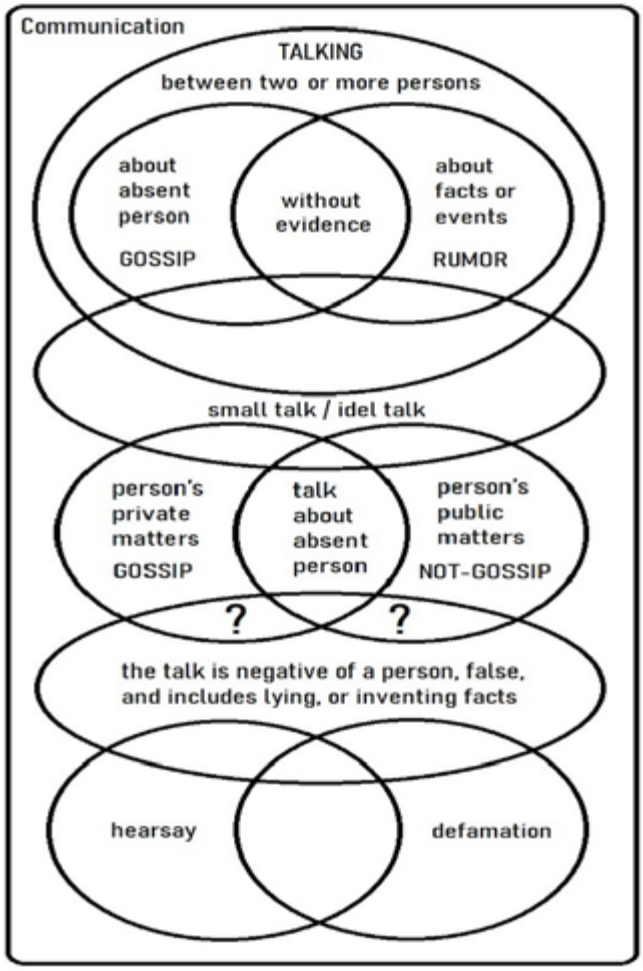

Figure 1: The problem of dictionary definitions of gossip

Even if one says that the condition (f) can be taken as implied as well as condition (d), what remains is perhaps the most important difference between definitions which concerns moral nature. Concerning moral nature, three possibilities are mentioned: gossip is morally neutral, gossip is morally positive (e.g., funny), and gossip is morally negative (e.g., malicious). The strongest difference is between morally neutral and morally negative definitions, so, their relation creates the most important problem – is it possible to create a unified definition of gossip or we have a deep divide between, if we may say at the moment, descriptive (or procedural) and normative (or morally negative) definitions. For sure there is a difference in words which aren't complete synonyms, as suggested in *Figure 1*, namely between words gossip, rumor, idle talk, small talk, backbite, hearsay, defamation and similar. While idle and small talk, but also gossip and rumor don't imply the element of immorality, backbite, hearsay, and defamation imply the element of immorality. Among these, the closest to gossip is backbite, so hereafter we will shortly consider its problem.

The problem of backbite condition (condition g)

Some gossip criteria include an additional condition. The condition of negativity of the content of a talk is sometimes included in the criterion of gossip, and it says: (g) in a way that the talk is negative of a person, false, and includes lying, or inventing facts (e.g., bullshitting) about the person. There is even a special word for this element, namely *backbite* or *backbiting*, commonly understood as making spiteful slanderous or defamatory statements about someone, (attacking from behind with spiteful or defamatory remarks, or speaking badly of an absent individual). However, this element is not consensually accepted since for different reasons it is thought that gossip isn't necessarily morally negative, but that it can be morally positive as well, i.e. the criterion doesn't necessarily include (g) condition which in fact falls under not a criterion of a gossip, but under a division of gossips under a moral aspect.

- The problem lies in the distinction between gossip and backbiting – specifically, do they differ in kind or degree? If they differ in kind, the two types might be *procedural gossip* (or simply gossip) and *normatively negative gossip* (or immoral gossip), which would imply the existence of moral gossip as well. On the other hand, if they differ in degree, the degrees must be justified. One possibility is to say that conditions (a – c) are mildly immoral, conditions (d – f) medium immoral, and the condition (g) is extremely immoral (procedural feature of condition would go other way around, i.e. from extremely procedural from (a) to minimally procedural in (g). This condition (g) is important because of a specific reason. Regardless of where one draws a line between procedural and normative condition even if normative (even if they are immoral) conditions are only minimally, implicitly, or instrumentally normative, and are dominantly procedural, one still has the following problem: is it possible to define a gossip completely procedurally without implying at least some elements of immorality, and further on, make a distinction between morally right and morally wrong gossips (e.g., backbite), or is this impossible, and every definition of gossip includes if not both morally right and wrong gossips, then at least morally wrong gossips?

It can be argued that perhaps conditions (d) + (f) already imply immorality of gossip, even without condition (g). They imply it if it is possible to argue that (d) talking about an absent person (without the permission to talk in its absence) about (e) the person's personal or private affairs for which they (f) lack evidence is already immoral in certain sense even if all things said during a

conversation are true. Furthermore, the border between descriptive and normative conditions of gossip may be drawn between different conditions. Namely, the line can be drawn between conditions (a) – (c) as descriptive, and (d) – (f) as normative, between (a) – (d) as descriptive, and (e) – (f) as normative, and between (a) – (f) as descriptive, and (g) as normative. The point is that even if one excludes the condition (g) of morally negative gossips (backbite) in order to preserve the possibility of (h) morally positive gossips, one still has the problem of differing between descriptive (i.e., procedural) and normative (i.e., moral) conditions. It is also possible to suggest that all conditions have procedural and normative aspects and to differ between them.

The problem with the procedural criterion starts with the condition (d) given that conditions (a–c) are satisfied. Namely, is the condition (d) only procedural, or is it also at least in some sense normative, in particular morally negative? If it is immoral to talk about absent person, then the suggested procedural criterion already has at least some morally negative aspect. However, if it is not immoral, or moral for that matter, then the problem moves to conditions (e) and (f) which seem to at imply immorality in much stronger sense than the condition (d). Even if one takes the condition (e), i.e., that of privacy as procedural, and not moral (in fact immoral), the condition (f) show at least some aspects of immorality. Namely, it seems common thing to believe that it is at least irresponsible to talk about something for which one does not have evidence, or for which there is no available evidence, as having evidence (for sure this is a kind of epistemic vice).

- Here, one should not exclude the possibility that gossip is differently described in different cultures, their customs and habits, especially their religions (which often include some version of the condition (g) in the criterion), but also their different dominant ethical ideals, and sometimes even ethical theories. Even if all mentioned problems are settled, these additional problems may create a significant not only theoretical, but also practical obstacles (just imagine that one has a concept of a gossip which is formal and procedural in terms of conditions (a – f) in one culture, and is informally or formally accused of a wrongdoing which includes gossiping as understood as necessary immoral, i.e. including the condition (g) in another culture).

On the other hand, and contrary to all previously said, there are studies[37] that argue that gossips can be morally good, especially at workplace. However, as it seems, many of these accounts do not discuss the morality of gossip itself, rather the morality of consequences of gossiping which further on can be morally good and morally bad. In this sense we discuss gossip in the present research.

Discussion

We have seen that gossip is a nuanced phenomenon whose meaning shifts across various frameworks. Namely, religious teachings frequently warn against gossip, emphasizing its potential to disrupt community cohesion and moral order. However, gossip can also serve as a mechanism for reinforcing shared values and promoting solidarity within a group. This dual role – where gossip can either uphold or undermine moral frameworks – illustrates its complexity as a form of social capital. Theological discussions further raise intriguing questions about the relationship between gossip and divine justice. Specifically, gossip highlights the tension between human fallibility in knowledge-sharing and the ideal of divine omniscience, prompting reflection on whether gossip reflects human shortcomings or serves as a tool for moral discernment. In philosophy, gossip is often analyzed through an epistemological lens, focusing on how it relates to truth, knowledge, and the social consequences of informal information exchange. Central to our discourse is the *lack of evidence* (condition f), which raises questions about the reliability and epistemic value of gossip. Condition (f) actually engages with the question whether gossip is morally neutral or morally charged, challenging the assumption that gossip is inherently harmful. Instead, the moral weight of gossip depends on factors such as intent, context, and outcomes, reflecting its dual capacity to harm or help social relationships. We have also seen that, in theological contexts, gossip is framed within moral and communal dimensions. Furthermore, in the realm of business ethics, gossip takes on additional layers of complexity. It functions as a strategic tool for navigating organizational hierarchies, influencing reputations, and fostering collaboration. At the same time, gossip can become a destructive force that undermines trust, damages relationships, and fosters hostility. The ethical ambiguity of workplace gossip prompts important questions about whether it can ever be virtuous. This is where the distinction between gossip's *procedural* and *normative* dimensions (conditions a – g) becomes crucial for determining its ethical status. The procedural elements define gossip structurally, but normative elements – particularly personal motivations such as envy, malice, or self-interest – determine its moral impact.

[37] Grosser et al., 2010; Dijkstra et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2021; Dai et al., 2022.

Gossip as a Mechanism of Moral Judgment and Moral Motivation

At its core, gossip involves evaluative speech, often leading to informal judgments about the moral behavior of absent individuals. As outlined in conditions (a) – (g), gossip possesses a structural framework, but its moral implications are far less clear-cut. The question is: *When does gossip transition from a neutral exchange of information to an act of moral harm?*

The procedural elements of gossip (a – f) help us understand how it operates as a social mechanism, but moral motivation – the intent behind the gossip – determines its ethical significance. When gossip aligns with social norms and reinforces communal values, it functions as a form of social capital that fosters moral cohesion. In contrast, gossip motivated by personal gain, envy, or malice (conditions f and g) can become a vehicle for moral disintegration. This duality emphasizes the role of context in evaluating gossip's ethical implications. Gossip allows individuals to assert moral authority, align themselves with social norms, or ostracize those who deviate from acceptable behavior. In this sense, gossip acts as a form of collective moral judgment. However, the tension between gossip's procedural neutrality and its potential moral consequences complicates the assumption that it is inherently unethical. Gossip's moral weight depends not only on the intentions of the participants but also on the broader social and cultural contexts within which it occurs.

Antecedents and Outcomes of Moral Judgment in Gossip as Social Capital

The criterion-based framework sheds light on the antecedents and outcomes of gossip, particularly in relation to its function as social capital. Gossip often emerges in informal settings where trust, reputational concerns, and power dynamics intersect. If no other people are involved, gossip is not gossip but simply a negative or ill-intentioned thought. The antecedents indicate that gossip also represents a strategic form of communication that influences social hierarchies and community cohesion. One of the key outcomes of gossip is its impact on moral judgment. Through the informal exchange of information about absent individuals, gossip shapes perceptions of moral character and behavior, with both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, gossip serves as a tool for social regulation, encouraging conformity to communal norms. It reinforces collective values by sanctioning individuals who deviate from group expectations. On the negative side, gossip can spread false narratives, fuel unjust social exclusion, or escalate conflicts. In business settings, gossip plays a particularly significant role as social capital. It facilitates the formation of alliances, aids in navigating organizational politics, and influences reputations. However, it also carries ethical risks: gossip can devolve into slander, defamation, or backbiting (condition g), undermining trust and collaborative efforts. This moral ambiguity highlights the need for ethical guidelines that distinguish between constructive and destructive gossip within professional environments.

Normative and Procedural Definitions of Gossip

Another central theme in this analysis is the tension between the procedural and normative definitions of gossip. While a purely procedural definition focuses on the structural elements (a–f), the inclusion of condition (g) introduces a moral dimension, complicating the framework. Even if condition (g) is excluded, certain procedural elements – such as discussing an absent person (condition d) or sharing unverified information (condition f) – carry implicit moral implications. These features suggest that even the procedural aspects of gossip cannot be entirely separated from normative concerns. The challenge, then, lies in determining whether gossip can ever be morally neutral or if it inherently carries moral weight. Even when gossip does not meet the criteria for malicious intent (condition g), it still operates within a moral framework that evaluates trustworthiness, loyalty, and social responsibility. Thus, the procedural criteria of gossip implicitly contain normative elements, blurring the line between descriptive and evaluative judgments. Moreover, cultural and religious contexts further complicate this distinction. In some cultures, gossip may be understood purely as a procedural act, while in others, it carries normative implications tied to moral or religious codes. For example, religious traditions often incorporate elements similar to condition (g), framing gossip as inherently sinful. This variability underscores the importance of context in shaping both the procedural and normative dimensions of gossip.

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that gossip mainly operates at the intersection of procedural structure and normative judgment, making it difficult to reach a unified definition. Procedurally, gossip involves specific conditions: a conversation among two or more individuals about an absent person's private matters, often shared without evidence (conditions a–f). However, the moral implications of gossip are far more contentious. While some frameworks emphasize gossip's inherent risks – such as reputa-

tional harm, falsehoods, and malicious intent (condition g) – others highlight its potential to be morally neutral or even beneficial, depending on intent and context. This tension between descriptive and normative interpretations becomes even more pronounced when viewed through cultural, religious, and situational lenses. Different societies and ethical traditions either condemn gossip for its capacity to disrupt social harmony or regard it as a mechanism for reinforcing communal values and transmitting social norms. In religious contexts, gossip is often framed as morally destructive, yet it can also foster solidarity and shared moral understanding. Similarly, in professional environments, gossip serves as a double-edged sword: it can facilitate navigation of power dynamics and build informal networks, but it also risks undermining trust and collaboration. Ultimately, the morality of gossip hinges on its intent, context, and outcomes. When gossip is motivated by a desire to uphold social norms, foster cohesion, or facilitate moral accountability, it functions as a form of social capital, contributing to the moral judgment within a group. However, gossip driven by malice, envy, or misinformation becomes a force of moral disintegration, spreading division and harming relationships.

This duality highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of gossip – one that accounts for both its procedural elements and ethical ramifications. Rather than treating gossip as inherently good or bad, we must recognize its moral weight as context-dependent. By examining both the conditions under which gossip occurs and the motivations behind it, we can better assess its role in shaping social interactions, trust, and moral outcomes. Moreover, the interplay between procedural and normative dimensions of gossip can be further explored through experimental research methods, providing deeper insights into its role in shaping social dynamics and ethical behavior.

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L'expérience mystique nous dit-elle quelque chose sur l'ordre du réel? L'exemple de Thérèse d'Avila

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Abstract

Since mystical experience is subjective, lived as a face-to-face encounter with God, the question arises as to the extent to which it can tell us something objective about the order of reality. By analysing the mystical experience of Teresa of Ávila, we will examine whether it presents a potential for rationalisation, communicability and reproducibility, since these are key attributes for assessing the epistemic value of an experience. Although Teresa of Ávila's mystical experience exceeds the field of proof in the strict positivist sense, the article argues that it nevertheless constitutes a significant experiential datum. Without directly proving the attributes of God as conceived by the Christian tradition, Teresa of Ávila's mystical experience supports the metaphysical conception according to which a transcendent first principle grounds reality and can manifest itself through human subjectivity.

Keywords: Teresa of Ávila, mystical experience, metaphysics, first principle of reality

Par « expérience mystique », on entend une forme d'expérience dans laquelle l'individu croit entrer en contact immédiat avec une réalité ultime. Dans la tradition chrétienne, cette réalité ultime est Dieu, le Créateur de tout ce qui existe, l'Être suprême, tout-puissant et omniscient. D'après les récits des mystiques, même si l'expérience peut revêtir des formes différentes, ce qui permet de distinguer plusieurs types de mystique, elle s'accompagne de la présence immédiate de Dieu et d'un sentiment de bonheur suprême : les mystiques affirment qu'il s'agit là d'une expérience inouïe, qui ne peut être comparée à rien d'autre. Or, la mystique est un phénomène profondément personnel et subjectif, un face-à-face avec Dieu ; elle est « …une prise de conscience particulièrement nette de la présence agissante de Dieu en celui en qui elle se révèle. »[1] Dès lors, une question s'impose : peut-on affirmer que la mystique nous dit quelque chose sur l'ordre du réel ? Quelle est sa portée ontologique ?

Mystique comme problème philosophique

Dans cet article, nous proposons d'aborder la mystique du point de vue de la philosophie de la religion, dans une perspective réaliste : en admettant que le monde extérieur existe et fonctionne indépendamment de notre esprit, la question est de savoir si l'expérience mystique possède une portée ontologique et peut nous dire quelque chose sur l'ordre du réel, ou si elle se réduit à un vécu subjectif. Nous mobiliserons des éléments épistémologiques et phénoménologiques pour confronter la mystique aux autres formes d'expérience, et nous verrons dans quelle mesure l'expérience mystique peut être considérée comme rationalisable, communicable, et reproductible. Ce sont là des attributs importants en épistémologie, qui permettent d'évaluer la valeur épistémique d'une expérience. Si la mystique ne relève pas du domaine scientifique au sens positiviste, nous verrons dans quelle mesure il est toutefois justifié de lui accorder une portée ontologique.

[1] Huot de Longchamp, M., *Qu'est-ce qu'un mystique ? Quand Dieu devient évident*. (Éditions Artège, Paris, 2021), 12.

Le sujet étant très vaste, et afin de pouvoir mobiliser des éléments textuels concrets, nous proposerons notre analyse à partir de l'expérience mystique de sainte Thérèse d'Avila. Ce choix nous semble particulièrement approprié, car la mystique espagnole a laissé un nombre considérable d'écrits, dont plusieurs ont été rédigés dans un but pédagogique au sein de la communauté monastique, afin de partager son expérience avec des personnes qui n'avaient pas eu d'expérience semblable. Aussi, son expérience mystique est considérée comme unitive et d'un degré élevé d'intensité, ce qui est d'ailleurs confirmé par un grand nombre de témoignages et nous permettra de considérer son expérience comme authentique dès le début de notre analyse. Comme le souligne Bernard Sesé à propos de la mystique espagnole : « L'extase a des effets variés : l'esprit en est ébahi pendant un ou deux jours. L'extase peut aller jusqu'au vertige et à la perte de conscience. L'extase s'effectue souvent de façon intempestive. »[2]

Quel intérêt la mystique présente-t-elle pour la philosophie ? Il faut préciser ici que le même genre de questions ne s'impose pas en théologie au sujet de la mystique. La raison en est simple : pour la théologie, l'expérience mystique relève de l'ordre du surnaturel. Par sa grâce, Dieu peut ouvrir au mystique un champ de connaissance et d'expérience radicalement nouveau, qui dépasse le cadre naturel et physique. Or, la philosophie utilise une méthode différente : elle étudie rationnellement les questions fondamentales portant sur le réel et la vie humaine, sans se fonder sur un cadre théologique préalable. La mystique est un champ particulièrement fécond pour la philosophie, selon nous, car elle permettrait d'avoir une expérience directe du principe ultime du réel, en l'occurrence Dieu, ce qui constitue une question philosophique majeure. L'enjeu est donc important pour la philosophie : la mystique permettrait, sinon de prouver quoi que ce soit au sens positiviste, du moins de disposer d'une expérience documentée et située susceptible d'appuyer telle ou telle conception métaphysique du réel.

L'expérience englobante et unique

Pour déterminer s'il est légitime d'attribuer une portée ontologique à l'expérience mystique, il nous semble important d'examiner ce qui fait de la mystique une expérience particulière et unique.

Au sens général, une expérience n'acquiert véritablement de l'importance pour nous que dans la mesure où elle produit un effet émotionnel fort, modifie notre mode d'être et influe sur notre manière d'agir ; elle peut également donner sens à nos actions. Selon ce critère, il existe des expériences plus ou moins importantes, plus ou moins fondamentales, plus ou moins désirables. Sainte Thérèse semble elle-même appliquer une telle hiérarchisation de l'expérience humaine en utilisant l'architecture du château comme métaphore de l'âme : « J'ai considéré notre âme comme un château, fait d'un seul diamant, ou d'un cristal très pur, dans lequel il y a, de même que dans le ciel, diverses demeures. »[3]. Toutes les expériences ne se valent donc pas : certaines restent superficielles et passagères, tandis que d'autres transforment profondément l'individu, orientent son existence et modifient son rapport à lui-même, au monde et à Dieu.

Dans cette hiérarchie des expériences, l'expérience mystique occupe une place singulière, car elle ne se distingue pas seulement par une intensité plus grande, mais par une différence qualitative : elle introduit l'âme dans une joie et un bonheur d'un autre ordre, que Thérèse d'Avila distingue nettement des plaisirs ordinaires. La joie mystique atteint l'âme dans ce qu'elle a de plus profond et semble transformer son mode d'être tout entier. C'est ce que la mystique espagnole affirme explicitement : « Que dis-je ? il n'y a aucun rapport entre ce bonheur que goûte l'âme unie à Dieu, et les plaisirs de la terre. Leur origine étant entièrement différente, le sentiment qu'ils produisent l'est aussi, comme le peuvent attester ceux qui en ont fait l'expérience. J'ai dit ailleurs que les plaisirs de la terre n'affectent, en quelque sorte, que la superficie des sens, tandis que ces joies célestes pénètrent, ce semble, jusque dans la moelle des os. »[4]. On peut donc affirmer que l'expérience mystique est unique et appartient à un ordre qualitativement différent de celui des expériences humaines ordinaires. Elle devient alors une expérience à partir de laquelle les autres peuvent être mesurées, ordonnées et hiérarchisées.

Cela nous conduit à un autre point important : par son intensité, l'expérience mystique est englobante. Elle pénètre toutes les dimensions de l'existence du mystique et rayonne dans l'ensemble de sa vie. Elle ne demeure pas un simple moment intérieur, mais transforme la manière de penser, d'agir et de se situer dans le monde.

[2] Sesé, B., « Poétique de l'extase selon Thérèse d'Avila et Jean de la Croix. » *Hors-série 6 : Générations d'HispanismeS. L'aventure mystique de Thérèse d'Avila et de Jean de la Croix. Recueil d'articles de Bernard Sesé*. Société Française des Hispanistes et des Ibéro-Américanistes (SoFHIA), https://journals.openedition.org/hispanismes/18904, consulté le 4 mai 2026.

[3] Sainte Thérèse d'Avila, *Le château intérieur*. Carmel en France : https://www.carmel.asso.fr/sites/carmel.asso.fr/IMG/pdf/livre_des_demeures.pdf, consulté le 4 mai 2026.

[4] Ibid.

On peut donc déjà affirmer un trait particulier de l'expérience mystique : elle relève d'une transformation profonde, d'une véritable *metanoia*, et son intensité est telle qu'elle modifie durablement les repères du mystique et son mode d'agir. Cette transformation prend souvent la forme d'une irruption dans le monde habituel du mystique. Il se produit quelque chose d'aussi radical que sa vie en est changée à jamais : il est arraché à ses cadres ordinaires. Le mystique ne peut y résister et se rend seulement compte qu'une force supérieure agit sur lui : « En effet, avec la même facilité qu'un géant enlève une paille, le Fort des forts, notre grand Dieu, enlève l'esprit. »[5]. Sainte Thérèse insiste ainsi sur la passivité de l'individu dans l'expérience mystique : l'âme ne produit pas elle-même ce mouvement, elle le reçoit et s'y trouve entraînée. C'est précisément cette absence de maîtrise qui distingue l'expérience mystique d'un simple exercice intérieur ou d'un état psychologique volontairement recherché : « De même qu'au milieu de la tempête tous les efforts du pilote et des matelots ne sauraient empêcher un vaisseau d'aller où le poussent les vagues en furie, de même l'âme ne peut rien contre cet irrésistible mouvement des flots qui l'emportent ; tout en elle, les sens, les puissances, et ce qu'il peut y avoir d'extérieur, se trouve contraint de céder. »[6]. L'expérience mystique est donc englobante : elle mobilise toutes les dimensions de l'être humain et l'ensemble de ses facultés. Dans une perspective phénoménologique, Rudolf Otto parle du *mysterium tremendum*, c'est-à-dire du sentiment du sacré comme d'une réalité d'un autre ordre qui saisit l'homme avec une intensité particulière : « Il peut aussi surgir brusquement de l'âme avec des chocs et des convulsions. Il peut conduire à d'étranges excitations, à l'ivresse, aux transports, à l'extase. »[7]. Otto montre que l'expérience du sacré ne se présente pas simplement comme une idée ou une croyance, mais comme un événement vécu, capable de provoquer un frisson intérieur et de bouleverser profondément celui qui en fait l'expérience.

À ce stade, il nous semble pertinent de considérer une critique possible : l'objection la plus forte contre la prétention de l'expérience mystique à un caractère unique consiste à souligner son affinité avec d'autres formes d'expériences humaines. Toute expérience peut être intense ; toute expérience peut également conduire à des transformations profondes : la rencontre d'un homme ou d'une femme qui change le cours d'une vie, le succès d'une entreprise importante, ou encore une souffrance profonde, telle que la perte d'une personne aimée. Ces expériences peuvent modifier durablement l'existence d'un individu et transformer ses points de repère. Bertrand Russell fournit l'une des meilleures formulations de cette objection : « Mysticism is, in essence, little more than a certain intensity and depth of feeling in regard to what is believed about the universe… » [8] Autrement dit, ce qui apparaît au mystique comme une révélation de la structure du réel pourrait n'être, selon cette interprétation, qu'un sentiment particulièrement puissant.

Or, c'est précisément l'intensité de l'expérience mystique qui, selon Thérèse d'Avila, constitue l'un de ses traits distinctifs. Les autres formes d'expérience se situent sur une échelle : leur intensité peut varier, croître ou diminuer. L'expérience mystique, en revanche, même si elle peut elle aussi comporter des degrés, est décrite comme atteignant un ordre qualitativement supérieur, comme si elle se situait au sommet du pôle expérientiel humain. Sur le plan épistémologique, cependant, ce point constitue aussi une limite importante : l'expérience mystique ne peut être pleinement comprise qu'à partir du vécu subjectif : « Oh ! qu'il est difficile de faire comprendre ceci à des cœurs qui ne savent pas par expérience combien le Seigneur est doux ! Chrétiens, chrétiens, considérez que vous êtes devenus les frères de ce grand Dieu. »[9]. D'autre part, on peut également remarquer qu'aucune forme d'expérience humaine, pour banale ou quotidienne qu'elle soit, ne peut être décrite et transmise de manière exhaustive par des moyens purement rationnels. Cette difficulté épistémologique ne vient donc pas nécessairement d'un défaut propre à l'expérience mystique ; elle révèle plutôt les limites d'une méthode strictement positiviste ou quantitative lorsqu'elle prétend épuiser le contenu d'une expérience vécue au sens général.

Pour résumer, sans pouvoir encore déterminer si la mystique nous dit effectivement quelque chose sur l'ordre du réel, on peut affirmer qu'il s'agit d'une expérience unique et englobante, d'une intensité exceptionnelle, qui se distingue nettement des expériences ordinaires. À cet égard, la comparaison biblique du royaume des cieux avec une perle de grand prix est particulièrement parlante, ce royaume que l'expérience mystique permet d'anticiper partiellement selon la tradition chrétienne : « …le royaume des cieux est encore semblable à un marchand qui

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Otto, R., *Le sacré*. (Éditions Payot, Paris, 1949), 36.

[8] Russell, B., « Mysticism and logic. » *Mysticism and logic. And other essays*. (George Allen & Unwin Ltd, Londres, 1917), 3.

[9] Sainte Thérèse d'Avila, « Les exclamations de l'âme. » *Œuvres de Sainte Thérèse. Tome deuxième*. (Librairie Victor Lecoffre, Paris, 1927), 514.

cherchait de belles perles. Ayant trouvé une perle de grand prix, il s'en alla vendre tout ce qu'il avait, et l'acheta… »[10].

Le rapport de l'expérience mystique à la rationalité

La question décisive n'est pas tant de savoir si l'expérience mystique est rationnelle en elle-même, car, à strictement parler, aucune expérience ne l'est dans son noyau irréductible de vécu, mais plutôt de déterminer si elle entre en contradiction avec la rationalité ou si, au contraire, elle peut être intégrée dans un discours rationnel. La perspective phénoménologique est particulièrement éclairante à ce sujet. Edmund Husserl, en parlant du caractère donné et irréductible de l'expérience humaine au sens large, évoque l'expérience mystique : « Indeed, we are here reminded of the speech of the mystics when they describe the intellectual act of seeing that contains no discursive knowledge. »[11]. La rationalité intervient ensuite comme effort d'interprétation, de mise en forme et de communication. Il serait donc problématique d'exiger de l'expérience mystique qu'elle soit rationnelle dans son surgissement même, alors que cette exigence ne vaut pour aucune autre expérience humaine. L'enjeu véritable consiste plutôt à déterminer dans quelle mesure cette expérience peut faire l'objet d'un discours rationnel.

La connaissance humaine, y compris la connaissance scientifique, se fonde toujours sur un rapport premier à l'expérience, même si celle-ci est ensuite médiatisée, analysée et systématisée. À ce propos, Henri Bergson rappelle justement un principe fondamental : « Il n'y a pas d'autre source de connaissance que l'expérience. »[12]. Loin d'être opposée à l'expérience, la rationalité s'enracine en elle. On aurait en effet du mal à concevoir un sujet pensant qui n'aurait, au préalable, aucune expérience de son existence, de son activité intellectuelle ou du monde qui l'entoure. La rationalité repose donc sur un pôle expérientiel originaire qui la rend possible. En ce sens, toute forme de rationalité se développe à partir d'un fond de vécu qui la précède et qui ne se laisse jamais totalement réduire à la conceptualisation.

On voit donc que cette difficulté ne se limite pas à la mystique. Sur le plan du vécu irréductible, on peut déjà constater que l'expérience mystique ne se distingue pas fondamentalement des autres formes d'expérience : aucune description ne saurait épuiser la totalité du vécu, qu'il soit mystique ou non. Pourtant, cette limite n'empêche nullement l'existence de discours rationnels sur l'expérience humaine. Il serait donc problématique de supposer que la rationalité se situerait dans un certain non-lieu épuré, entièrement séparé du vécu du sujet pensant. Dès lors, toute opposition radicale entre l'expérience mystique et la rationalité perd considérablement en force. Cependant, l'expérience mystique semble se dérober encore davantage à toute systématisation que les autres types d'expérience. Sainte Thérèse insiste souvent sur l'ineffabilité de ce qu'elle vivait et sur le caractère non discursif de son expérience : « Quand l'âme se trouve dans l'oraison de quiétude, elle sent bien que la volonté jouit d'un bonheur calme et profond : mais elle ne peut dire en quoi il consiste. »[13]. S'il est vrai que l'expérience mystique est plus difficilement rationalisable que d'autres formes d'expérience, en raison de son caractère unique, cela constitue une limite, mais non un obstacle radical qui empêcherait de produire un discours rationnel. Un discours rationnel, même s'il n'est ni complet ni exhaustif, peut pointer vers le non-discursif. On peut donc, avec les limites mentionnées, tenir un discours rationnel sur l'expérience mystique ; c'est d'ailleurs ce que l'exemple de Thérèse d'Avila montre clairement : la mystique espagnole s'efforçait de le faire dans des buts pédagogiques. Dans cette perspective, il ne nous semble pas légitime d'exclure l'expérience mystique du domaine de la rationalité, puisque la rationalité est toujours dérivée par rapport à l'expérience en général.

La communicabilité et la reproductibilité de l'expérience mystique

Maintenant, il s'agit de déterminer dans quelle mesure l'expérience mystique peut être objectivée et communiquée, c'est-à-dire décrite, organisée discursivement et discutée de manière méthodique avec d'autres individus, notamment avec des non-mystiques. Il est important de noter que ce qui confère une valeur rationnelle à une expérience n'est pas son caractère immédiatement subjectif ou objectif, mais la possibilité de la soumettre à un travail d'objectivation, de la décrire de manière cohérente et d'en transmettre certaines conditions d'intelligibilité. Sur

[10] Saint Matthieu l'Évangéliste, « Évangile selon saint Matthieu. » *Bible*. Augustin Crampon (tr.), édition numérique par JESUSMARIE.com, consulté le 4 mai 2026.

[11] Husserl, E., « The idea of phenomenology. » *Edmund Husserl. Collected works. Volume 8*. (Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht/Boston, 1999), 46-47.

[12] Bergson, H., « Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion. » *Henri Bergson : Œuvres complètes*. (Arvensa Éditions, 2014), 1211.

[13] Sainte Thérèse d'Avila, « Le chemin de la perfection. » *Œuvres de Sainte Thérèse. Tome troisième*. (Librairie Victor Lecoffre, Paris, 1927), 177.

ce point, Gaston Bachelard souligne que l'objectivité ne se présente jamais comme un donné immédiat : « On ne peut arriver à l'objectivité qu'en exposant d'une manière discursive et détaillée une méthode d'objectivation. »[14]. C'est pourquoi nous proposons maintenant d'examiner la manière dont Thérèse d'Avila parle aux autres de son expérience mystique. Utilise-t-elle une méthode ?

Ce n'est pas par hasard que sainte Thérèse évoque elle-même l'incapacité de l'intelligence humaine à décrire pleinement l'expérience mystique : c'est quelque chose qu'il faut éprouver pour comprendre. Ce constat réduit considérablement la mesure dans laquelle l'expérience mystique peut être communiquée. Le mieux que l'on puisse faire semble alors consister à affirmer qu'une telle expérience est possible, à tenter d'en transmettre certains aspects, puis à laisser ceux qui l'ont éprouvée en juger. Cependant, et en dépit de ces difficultés, il serait, à notre sens, également erroné d'affirmer que l'expérience mystique n'est pas communicable du tout. Dans ses efforts pédagogiques, Thérèse d'Avila écrit plusieurs textes assez détaillés sur le déploiement de cette expérience et sur ses effets. La sainte affirme explicitement qu'elle veut permettre aux autres de la comprendre ; bref, elle veut la communiquer, tout en gardant à l'esprit les limites d'une telle démarche : « Je vous parlerai donc de ces opérations surnaturelles de la grâce, et j'essaierai de plusieurs manières de vous en donner l'intelligence. »[15]. Cette volonté d'explication ne s'arrête pas à une simple description. Elle s'accompagne d'une tentative de distinction et de classification des différentes expériences spirituelles : « Mon dessein est seulement d'indiquer de mon mieux en quoi diffèrent ces visions, et de vous faire connaître la nature et les effets de chacune. »[16]. Certes, ces tentatives ne prétendent pas épuiser la totalité de l'expérience vécue. Mais elles suffisent déjà à montrer que, loin d'exclure toute tentative de communicabilité, l'expérience mystique peut, pour reprendre le terme bachelardien, faire l'objet d'un effort d'objectivation.

Cependant, il reste une autre limite importante. Tandis que la plupart des formes d'expérience humaine peuvent être reproduites par d'autres individus, l'expérience mystique ne possède pas de mécanisme au sens strict qui dépendrait des efforts humains. Selon la théologie chrétienne, elle relève du surnaturel, c'est-à-dire d'une grâce spéciale de Dieu. Thérèse d'Avila ne s'illusionne pas sur la reproductibilité de son expérience : « C'est Dieu qui fait tout, c'est son ouvrage, ouvrage au-dessus de notre nature. »[17]. Autrement dit, l'expérience mystique peut être décrite, expliquée et partiellement communiquée, mais elle ne peut pas être reproduite à volonté. Thérèse d'Avila peut indiquer des dispositions, des chemins spirituels et des effets reconnaissables ; elle ne peut pas garantir l'apparition de l'expérience elle-même, qui demeure, dans son cadre chrétien, dépendante de l'action divine. Cela étant, il faut également garder à l'esprit que l'exemple de la mystique espagnole peut inspirer les autres en leur donnant une figure concrète de spiritualité profonde. En ce sens, il peut les encourager à poursuivre le chemin de la perfection spirituelle. Ainsi, sans pouvoir être reproduite, l'expérience mystique peut être partiellement communiquée aux autres ; et cette communicabilité partielle suffit déjà à exercer une influence réelle. Une telle démarche peut contribuer à créer, chez ceux qui la reçoivent, des dispositions intérieures plus favorables, souvent associées, dans le cadre chrétien, à la réception des grâces spéciales de Dieu.

On peut donc conclure que l'expérience mystique est beaucoup plus difficile à communiquer et à rationaliser que la plupart des autres formes d'expérience humaine. Toutefois, il serait réducteur de lui refuser toute rationalisation et toute communicabilité. Dans une certaine mesure, on peut tenir un discours rationnel sur l'expérience mystique et faire part aux autres de sa possibilité. Sans garantir sa reproductibilité, ce qui demeure un point essentiel pour juger de sa portée ontologique objective, Thérèse d'Avila montre qu'il est possible d'aider les autres à créer les dispositions intérieures habituellement associées à cette expérience. On peut alors soutenir que, de manière indirecte, les enseignements de la mystique espagnole auraient pu aider certains de ceux qui lisaient ses écrits ou la connaissaient de son vivant à recevoir des grâces mystiques. Mais une difficulté nouvelle apparaît alors. Si chaque expérience mystique demeure individuelle et subjective, tout en reconnaissant que Thérèse d'Avila a contribué à la diffusion d'une certaine expérience spirituelle, peut-on affirmer qu'il existe quelque chose de commun entre ces expériences ? Dans quelle mesure peut-on parler de l'expérience mystique comme catégorie, et non simplement de vécus subjectifs isolés, sans véritable lien les uns avec les autres ?

[14] Bachelard, G., *Le nouvel esprit scientifique*. Les classiques des sciences sociales, (Saguenay, 2008), 14.

[15] Sainte Thérèse d'Avila, *Le château intérieur*. Carmel en France, https://www.carmel.asso.fr/sites/carmel.asso.fr/IMG/pdf/livre_des_demeures.pdf, consulté le 4 mai 2026.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Sainte Thérèse d'Avila, « Le chemin de la perfection. » *Œuvres de Sainte Thérèse. Tome troisième*. (Librairie Victor Lecoffre, Paris, 1927), 141.

La subjectivité et l'ordre du monde

Dans la perspective réaliste qui est celle de cet article, peut-on affirmer que l'expérience mystique, tout en restant subjective, comme Thérèse d'Avila le souligne elle-même, nous dit quelque chose d'objectif sur l'ordre du réel ? Peut-on la considérer comme susceptible d'appuyer une conception métaphysique particulière ?

Pour mieux comprendre la nature des difficultés en question, il nous semble pertinent de revenir à Bertrand Russell et à sa critique célèbre de l'expérience mystique. Selon le philosophe britannique, l'expérience mystique ne serait qu'un vécu personnel, car elle passerait par une interprétation ultérieure qui viendrait adjoindre un ensemble de croyances à l'expérience initiale. Ainsi, cette expérience n'aurait une valeur religieuse que de manière dérivée et construite : « Often, beliefs which have no real connection with this moment become subsequently attracted into the central nucleus ; thus in addition to the convictions which all mystics share, we find, in many of them, other convictions of a more local and temporary character, which no doubt become amalgamated with what was essentially mystical in virtue of their subjective certainty. »[18]. Selon cette perspective, l'expérience mystique posséderait bien un noyau affectif réel, une forme d'émotion intense ou de transformation intérieure, mais les interprétations qui lui sont associées dépendraient largement des croyances et du contexte culturel du mystique. Russell en tire une conclusion nette : « But if we are not to be led into false beliefs, it is necessary to realise exactly what the mystic emotion reveals. It reveals a possibility of human nature — a possibility of a nobler, happier, freer life than any that can be otherwise achieved. But it does not reveal anything about the non-human, or about the nature of the universe in general. »[19]. Ainsi comprise, l'expérience mystique ne révélerait rien sur la structure du réel : elle ne témoignerait que d'une possibilité particulière de la nature humaine, celle d'une transformation intérieure profonde. D'ailleurs, ce qui accentue la difficulté, c'est que sainte Thérèse elle-même exprime parfois des réserves quant à la capacité humaine de saisir le sens ultime de certaines faveurs mystiques, qui relèvent de la foi et du surnaturel : « De ces faveurs-là nous ne connaîtrons la valeur vraie que dans l'autre monde. »[20].

D'autre part, si l'objection russellienne repose principalement sur le manque de preuve, on peut objecter qu'il n'existe pas non plus de preuve décisive de l'absence de la portée ontologique de l'expérience mystique. Une prudence méthodologique à l'égard des contenus ontologiques de l'expérience mystique serait donc plus justifiée : on tirerait avantage soit à suspendre le jugement, soit à considérer une explication alternative. Il n'est pas sûr non plus que toute expérience mystique passe par une interprétation si radicale qu'elle en modifierait entièrement le contenu. Dans le cas de Thérèse d'Avila, le contraire semble même plus probable : nous avons vu que l'expérience mystique apparaît comme quelque chose d'irréductible, qui ne dépend pas de ses efforts et s'impose à elle. Or William James, dans ses analyses, montre qu'il est effectivement possible de soutenir que l'expérience mystique soit produite sous l'influence de forces supérieures, telles que Dieu dans la tradition chrétienne, et que la science ne possède pas assez de données pour rejeter en bloc les explications de ce type, surtout lorsqu'elles sont jugées depuis le point de vue de ceux qui n'ont jamais eu d'expérience mystique et ne la comprennent que de l'extérieur : « Yet, I repeat once more, the existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe. » [21] James ne démontre pas que les états mystiques révèlent nécessairement l'ordre du réel, mais il montre que l'expérience ordinaire ne peut pas s'arroger le droit exclusif de déterminer ce qui peut être cru ou tenu pour réel. L'expérience non mystique n'a donc pas le monopole de la normativité épistémique.

Mais plus encore, James montre que, si l'on admet l'existence de forces d'ordre spirituel, il serait entièrement cohérent que celles-ci entrent en contact avec l'homme à travers une zone profonde de sa conscience. En d'autres termes, le caractère subjectif de l'expérience mystique, loin de constituer nécessairement un obstacle, pourrait devenir un argument en faveur de l'hypothèse selon laquelle elle nous révèle quelque chose sur l'ordre du réel : « But just as our primary wide-awake consciousness throws open our senses to the touch of things material, so it is logically conceivable that if there be higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so might be our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them. »[22]. L'intériorité ne serait alors pas une fermeture au réel, mais une voie

[18] Russell, B., « Mysticism and logic. » *Mysticism and logic. And other essays*. (George Allen & Unwin Ltd, Londres, 1917), 9.

[19] Ibid., 28.

[20] Sainte Thérèse d'Avila, « Le chemin de la perfection. » *Œuvres de Sainte Thérèse. Tome troisième*. (Librairie Victor Lecoffre, Paris, 1927), 103.

[21] James, W., « The varieties of religious experience. » *The writings of William James*. (Dancing Unicorn Books, 2017), 621.

[22] Ibid., 476.

possible d'accès à une dimension du réel qui ne se donne pas à travers les sens ordinaires. De son côté, Maurice Blondel, en suivant une autre piste, rappelle qu'en réalité seul le particulier existe. Il affirme : « Car si pour la science discursive il n'y a de vérité que du général, il n'y a, en soi et pour Dieu, de réalité que du singulier. »[23]. Cette remarque est importante, car elle empêche d'identifier trop rapidement le réel avec ce qui est général, répétable et objectivable selon les méthodes positivistes. Si le réel est d'abord singulier, alors une expérience personnelle ne doit pas être exclue d'emblée du champ de la connaissance ; elle peut, au contraire, constituer l'un des lieux où le réel se manifeste dans sa forme concrète.

Ainsi, si l'on parle de la possibilité potentielle d'accéder au premier principe du réel, en l'occurrence Dieu, il n'est pas évident que le vécu personnel et subjectif doive être considéré comme un obstacle. Il pourrait au contraire constituer une voie d'accès privilégié, précisément parce que ce qui est visé n'est pas un objet général parmi d'autres, mais une réalité singulière, irréductible et transcendante. La question n'est donc pas de savoir si l'expérience mystique est subjective, car elle l'est manifestement, mais si cette subjectivité exclut toute portée ontologique. Or, sur base des analyses de James et de Blondel, on peut soutenir qu'une telle exclusion n'est pas méthodologiquement nécessaire.

Conclusion

Sur base de l'exemple de Thérèse d'Avila et de sa mystique unitive, nous avons vu que l'expérience mystique constitue une expérience unique, englobante et transformante. Elle ne se présente pas comme une expérience humaine parmi d'autres, mais comme une expérience d'un ordre qualitativement différent, marquée par une joie, un bonheur et un accomplissement que la mystique espagnole décrit comme incomparables. Cette singularité ne suffit pas encore à établir sa portée ontologique, mais elle permet déjà d'écarter une réduction trop rapide de la mystique à un simple état affectif intense. L'expérience affecte l'individu tout entier : elle transforme son intelligence, sa volonté, son rapport à lui-même, au monde et à Dieu. Nous avons ensuite examiné dans quelle mesure cette expérience peut être rationalisée, communiquée et reproduite. À cet égard, l'expérience mystique présente une difficulté majeure : elle comporte un noyau irréductible que le langage ne peut jamais épuiser. Thérèse d'Avila souligne elle-même qu'on ne comprend véritablement certaines grâces mystiques que si l'on en a fait l'expérience. Cependant, cette limite n'est pas propre qu'à la mystique. Toute expérience humaine comporte une dimension vécue qui échappe à la description exhaustive. La mystique accentue cette difficulté, mais ne l'introduit pas pour la première fois. Il serait donc injustifié de lui refuser toute portée ontologique au seul motif qu'elle ne peut pas être entièrement traduite en concepts.

L'exemple de Thérèse d'Avila montre précisément que l'expérience mystique, malgré son ineffabilité, peut faire l'objet d'un discours rationnel. Ses écrits ne se réduisent pas à l'expression spontanée d'un vécu intime ; ils comportent une véritable volonté de description, de distinction et de transmission. La mystique espagnole cherche à faire comprendre les différentes formes de l'oraison, les effets des grâces reçues, les degrés de la vie spirituelle et les dispositions qui rendent l'âme plus apte à recevoir l'action divine. Cela ne signifie pas que l'expérience mystique serait reproductible au sens scientifique ou technique du terme. Dans le cadre chrétien, elle relève de la grâce et ne peut donc pas être produite à volonté par les seuls efforts humains. Mais cela signifie qu'elle peut être partiellement communiquée, interprétée et intégrée dans un discours rationnel. Que doit-on en conclure ?

Avant tout, l'expérience mystique ne peut être tenue pour une preuve scientifique au sens positiviste. Elle n'est ni généralisable ni reproductible à volonté ; elle ne peut donc pas être soumise aux critères ordinaires de l'expérimentation. Toutefois, cette limite épistémique ne suffit pas à annuler sa portée ontologique. Une expérience peut ne pas être scientifiquement démontrable et pourtant constituer un donné important. Dans cette perspective, l'expérience mystique doit être considérée comme un *datum* expérientiel. Elle appartient au champ de l'expérience humaine possible et ne peut être écartée d'avance au motif qu'elle est rare, intérieure ou difficilement communicable.

Une fois ses limites épistémiques reconnues, la question de l'interprétation subsiste. Il nous paraît alors pertinent de recourir à la métaphysique, qui s'interroge précisément sur le fondement même du réel. Cette branche de la philosophie apparaît particulièrement appropriée pour interpréter une expérience qui se présente comme englobante et comme un contact direct avec le fondement ultime de ce qui existe.

La métaphysique dépassant le domaine des preuves au sens scientifique et positiviste, il semble clair toutefois qu'une conception métaphysique du réel peut être dite plus ou moins justifiée si elle est appuyée par une expérience humaine possible et si elle possède une valeur explicative qui couvre autant de phénomènes que possible. Essayons de faire un lien entre l'expérience mystique

[23] Blondel, M., « Le problème de la mystique. » *Maurice Blondel et la mystique*. (Hermann Éditeurs, Paris, 2025), 146.

et la métaphysique. Comme nous l'avons vu, l'expérience mystique n'est pas seulement possible en principe : Thérèse d'Avila en témoigne à maintes reprises. Elle peut donc appuyer de manière considérable une conception métaphysique du réel. Dans l'expérience mystique, tout semble apparaître comme provenant d'un principe premier du réel, en l'occurrence Dieu : l'individu, le monde, la joie, l'amour, l'être même. Or, pour juger de l'existence possible d'une chose, il faut pouvoir concevoir une expérience dans laquelle cette chose se manifesterait de manière irréductible. À supposer que certains individus puissent effectivement faire l'expérience d'un premier principe transcendant, et si cette expérience s'accompagne d'effets que l'on pourrait rationnellement attendre d'un tel principe - dépassement des catégories ordinaires, transformation profonde de l'individu, sentiment d'une présence supérieure, joie et accomplissement d'un ordre radicalement différent -, alors il devient légitime de considérer que cette expérience possède une cohérence interne forte.

Dès lors, dans ses grandes lignes, l'expérience de la mystique espagnole semble en effet correspondre à ce qu'une expérience possible du premier principe transcendant devrait pouvoir être : une expérience irréductible, englobante, non maîtrisable et transformante. Il nous semble certes problématique de prétendre prouver, à partir de cette expérience, les attributs de Dieu selon la tradition chrétienne ou l'ensemble des articles de foi, ce qui relève de la théologie. Ces contenus sont exprimés de manière discursive, tandis que l'expérience mystique relève, dans son noyau propre, du non-discursif. Cependant, l'expérience mystique semble pointer vers l'existence possible d'un premier principe transcendant qui dépasse toutes les catégories humaines. Cela va néanmoins dans le sens de la conception chrétienne de Dieu comme réalité qui dépasse tout ce qui existe ; on peut se souvenir ici de la théologie apophatique de Denys l'Aréopagite. Dans une expérience rationnellement concevable d'un tel premier principe, on ne devrait pas s'attendre à une manifestation toujours identique, précisément parce que ce principe dépasse toute représentation déterminée. On devrait plutôt s'attendre à un trait distinctif : le dépassement de tout ce que l'on peut concevoir. Or, l'expérience de Thérèse d'Avila possède tout le potentiel pour être considérée comme une telle expérience.

Ainsi, sur le plan métaphysique, deux conceptions demeurent particulièrement appropriées pour rendre compte de l'expérience mystique de Thérèse d'Avila. Selon la première, il n'existe aucun principe transcendant : l'expérience mystique doit alors être expliquée intégralement à partir de causes immanentes, psychologiques, affectives, culturelles ou symboliques. Elle peut certes demeurer une expérience humaine remarquable, mais elle ne dit rien, en elle-même, sur le fondement ultime du réel. Selon la seconde conception, le réel est fondé sur un premier principe transcendant : dans ce cadre, l'expérience mystique peut être comprise comme un signe expérientiel en faveur de l'existence de ce principe.

Or, avec les limites propres à toute démarche métaphysique, cette seconde conception nous semble plus justifiée, car elle possède une valeur explicative plus élevée : elle rend mieux compte d'un monde dans lequel coexistent des mystiques et des non-mystiques, c'est-à-dire d'un monde où l'expérience ordinaire n'épuise pas toutes les formes possibles de rapport au réel. L'expérience de la mystique espagnole semble effectivement correspondre à ce qu'une expérience rationnellement concevable du premier principe transcendant devrait pouvoir être : une expérience irréductible, englobante, non maîtrisable et transformante. C'est pourquoi il nous semble légitime de soutenir que l'expérience mystique de Thérèse d'Avila peut être considérée comme revêtant une portée ontologique : sur le plan métaphysique, l'existence d'un premier principe transcendant nous semble constituer un modèle explicatif plus efficace.

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[Book Review] David Hunt, *Something for Nothing? An Explanation and Defence of the Scholastic Position on Usury.*

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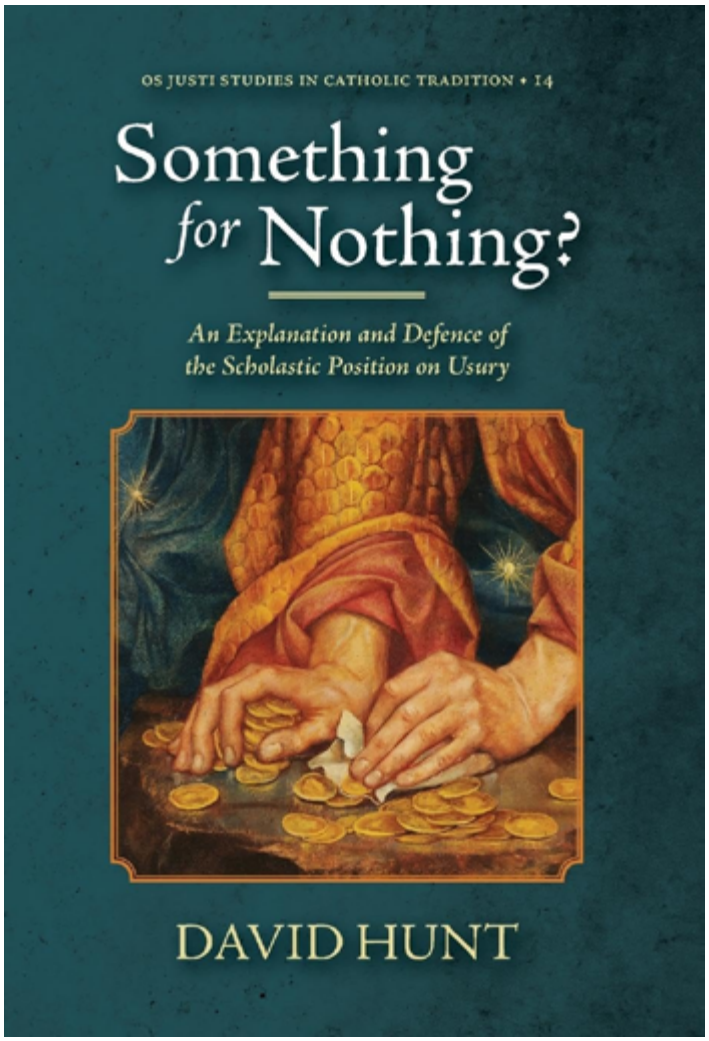
Throughout human history, usury appears as a persistent problem to every corner of the world. Repudiations and laws against usury have been so common that the evil of usury seems an inescapable fact of the human condition. However, today usury is all too often dismissed as medieval superstition or limited to merely excessive or oppressive interest. Yet, with the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the pressing concerns of rising levels of debt, usury continues to press upon people's minds and consciences.

For this reason David Hunt's recent book, *Something from Nothing*, is a timely addition to the discussion of usury. He structures the book in the form of answering four essential questions: 1) what is usury, 2) can interest be charged for other things besides the use of money, 3) if interest can never be charged, what course of action is left, and 4) does usury really deserve our attention. Without getting caught up in the complex history of the usury disputes, these questions provide a clear framework for approaching the problem of usury.

In the first part he lays out the core of the doctrine of usury, namely usury is profit, any profit on a *mutuum* loan. Those familiar with the Scholastic usury doctrine may be aware that usury can only arise from the *mutuum* loan. However, what Hunt adds to the discussion is a fresh interpretation of the *mutuum*. He provides the standard definition of the *mutuum* found in Roman Law. Yet he shows that from the nature of the contract itself, namely the rights and obligations it effects, the *mutuum* is essentially a personally secured loan. From the Roman Law definition ownership of the lent good passes to the borrower who may use it up in some way. After it is gone all the lender has recourse to for his return is the borrower himself, which is what is meant today by a personally secured loan.



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Hunt returns to this again in the third chapter as he explores other forms of profitable contracts. In discussing the societas or partnership, he shows how the profit due an investor arises from the partner's property claims. If a man grants some money to a merchant to trade with, the man has a claim to some portion of the profits *because* he did not transfer ownership. Unlike in the personally secured loan where ownership passes, the partner's profit arises precisely because they are tied to some claim against the assets of the partnership. He shows a similar logic in the census contract which involved a claim against some fruitful property, such as a farm or business. The census purchaser would exchange a sum of money for a regular share of the fruits of the property. If the seller failed to pay the "rents," the underlying property acted as security from which the buyer could recover his original price and outstanding payments but only from the property itself. This contract was licit for profit, but guaranteed by the property rather than the person of the seller making it distinct from the personally secured mutuum.

In the final chapter, Hunt draws out the urgency of usury from this personal security. Since the mutuum is personally guaranteed, the lender's claim to the principle is against the borrower himself. By exacting usury as a profit from this contract, the lender treats his claim against the borrower as a sort of rentable property claim. Indeed, Hunt will argue that this makes usury a species of chattel slavery which treats the person himself as a form of property. Hence usury is not merely an abstract injustice, but Hunt shows the rigorous meaning of debt slavery all too common today.

Another novelty of Hunt's approach is to address economic questions rather than simply conceding or adjusting the usury doctrine to conform to modern economic theories. For example, he considers the central economic argument against usury, time preference. It asserts that present goods are more valuable than future goods. Since the *mutuum* involves granting present goods for the return of future goods in order equalize the value of these a greater quantity of the latter needs to be returned. Hunt addresses this view by utilizing the so-called "Andrean argument" of the self-valuation of fungibles. When goods of the same kind are given and received there is no reason to rely on some extrinsic measure such as present utility as one would in the sale of diverse goods. Rather, the measure of the return is intrinsic to the nature of the good, namely an equality in nature. Indeed, fungible simply means "interchangeable in use" and the use proceeds from the nature of thing. This intrinsic measure then implies an equality of quantity of the thing in spite of the difference in time.

In spite of Hunt's insights, his work has some weaknesses that stem fundamentally from its brevity and broad scope. Hunt audaciously aims to present and defend the Scholastic doctrine of usury while responding to traditional and modern critiques and showing the urgency of the problem. However, this is all attempted in 78 pages, excluding the lengthy appendices. For example, while he does address the issue of time preference, this objection is introduced and refuted in only 2 pages, which is inadequate to treat the depth of the argument and potential rejoinders. Eugene von Bohm-Bawerk, a prominent developer of time preference theory cited by Hunt, suggests the possibility of the exchange of fungibles even at different valuations (The Positive Theory of Capital, New York, 1930, 290-295). While Bohm's argument is far from indefeasible, it does suggest a scantiness to Hunt's presentation.

Also due to the brevity, there is a lack of precision. Hunt treats the question of extrinsic titles on a mutuum. Usury is evil because it claims to take profit from the loan itself, i.e. intrinsically, but this does not exclude the possibility of some title extrinsic to the mutuum. One such title explored in the Scholastic tradition was *lucrum cessans*, which arose from the fact that a lender could not obtain profit from his money because he decided to lend. Hunt notes that these profits are hypothetical because they are what the lender *could have* made *had* he acted differently. Consequently, *lucrum cessans* involves a sort of sale of nothing. However, characterizing *lucrum cessans* as involving merely hypothetical profits would have sounded strange especially to the Late Scholastics. In his commentary on St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Cajetan treats the profits in *lurcum cessans* as real but potential. While he would ultimately take a highly restrictive view of *lucrum cessans*, he still speaks of the "potency of money under industry" as potential profits that may enter the contract and this is not merely hypothetical nor nothing.

Despite these weakness Hunt's little book provides a refreshingly new look at the usury question. His insightful identification of the *mutuum* as a personally secured loan is invaluable as most of the Scholastic debate over usury was not about *what* usury is but whether this or that new contract contains a *mutuum*. His work to engage the economist without either conceding too much or insisting all profit is usury is also a valuable contribution. However, it is a book that points to paths untrodden and thus it begs for further exploration and development.