

Rocks, persons and gods
Kelly James Clark

It has never been easy for me to understand the obliteration of time, to accept, as others seem to do, the swelling and corresponding shrinkage of seasons or the conscious acceptance that one year has ended and another begun. There is something here that speaks of our essential helplessness and how the greater substance of our lives is bound up with waste and opacity. Even the sentence parts seize on the tongue, so that to say "Twelve years passed" is to deny the fact of biographical logic. How can so much time hold so little, how can it be taken from us? Months, weeks, days, hours misplaced -- and the most precious time of life, too, when our bodies are at their greatest strength, and open, as they never will be again, to the onslaught of sensation. For twelve years, from age fourteen to twenty-six, my father, young Cuyler Goodwill, rose early, ate a bowl of oatmeal porridge, walked across the road to the quarry where he worked a nine-and-a-half hour day, then returned to the chill and meagerness of his parents' house and prepared for an early bed.

The recounting of a life is a cheat, of course; I admit the truth of this; even our own stories are obscenely distorted; it is a wonder really that we keep faith with the simple container of our existence.

Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries*

I

I am looking at a rock. In this light the look appears grayish with specks of white. The specks seem countless, but I count them and they number 104. The top of the rock is rounded with a slight indentation running from side to side. The light changes and the rock changes from grayish to light bluish. I pick it up and put it on the scales; the meter points to twelve and a half ounces. I look underneath and it is flat and smooth. The edges are curved and rough. The shape, from this perspective, is round but from another oblong and from another thin and wafery. I drop the rock on the sidewalk but it doesn't break. When I smash it with a marble-colored rock, tiny whitish flecks appear. I spit on blemishes, rub the spittle around, the flecks disappear. Now that it is wet it looks dark and shiny. It dries intermittently with spots of dark gray, gray, and blue. Now it is all blue.

I consult a geology textbook and learn that it is a piece of granite. It is in the plutonic class of common igneous rocks. Its acid composition is high and its essential silicate phases are quartz, potash feldspar, sodic plagioclase, biotite, and hornblende.

I never etch it with a diamond or immerse it in acid. I don't cover it in jello or attack it with a jackhammer. I don't study it in the light of dawn or early evening. I couldn't find it in the dark. I study it from a perspective or two or three or four, but I don't study it from perspectives five, six, seven.... I don't know how it differs from most other rocks, how it reacts with most other substances, how it persists unchanged for millennia. I have learned that such things, like most other things, are constructed out of tiny little particles which are traveling at relatively vast speeds and separated by relatively vast distances. What is manifestly and archetypically solid and unitary is a many occupying mostly empty space. Whether those tiny atoms which make it up are particles or waves or packets of energy, I can't recall at the moment. I don't know if it bubbled up from within the earth where I found it or if it was carried on some great glacier (the first or the second?). Perhaps it was brought here by a fellow-traveler or by a gardener or by a curious child. When I set it down and walk away I don't know if it will be carried away again by a glacier or a girl.

I don't know much about rocks. Yet I have, to the best of my ability, said some true things about this rock. I am reasonably certain that it was a rock, that it was roughly of this shape and not that shape, that it was just about this size not another, and that it would fit neatly and cleanly in my pocket and soothe me if I were to rub my fingers along it. Upon reflection, however, the rock infinitely overflows my thin description. It spills out of my tiny cup and lies in vast pools alongside. I have been sincere, honest and have expressed the, now as I see it puny, truth.

I recently met an old man. We were riding together on the train and as often happens with perfect strangers he, let's call him Ray, shared with me his life. Ray, like the rock, was old and gray. The years too had chipped off bits and left traces of powder which had been smoothed over with sweat and tears. His wife had died young, leaving him to raise his three children alone. He never remarried because he couldn't quite find the time and energy to seek another partner. He reckoned himself happy but his eyes tempered his reckoning with sadness. Not regret, he assured me, but sadness nonetheless. Ray was on his way to visit his sick granddaughter. His daughter was divorced and needed to work so he was going to care for the infirm child. Like the rock he seemed solid.

He told me that he had once accepted Jesus as His personal Lord and Savior but that it didn't mean much to him anymore. He occasionally went to church because he liked the choir and his lifelong friends whose names were showing up all too frequently in the obituary column which he always turned to first when he read the newspaper. His friends were peeling off like layers of an onion and he feared

being the last lonely layer to be torn from life.

I walked away from that train feeling that I had seldom spoken but been understood; that I had met a genuine human being who was related to me more than as members of the same species but as pieces off the same soul. The connection of heart to heart was fast and went deep. I was saddened and delighted with him. I had become reacquainted with a new friend. I ran home and promptly explained this complex and fascinating person to my wife.

Shortly thereafter I learned that Ray was somewhat famous and that an excellent biography had been written which described his life. I eagerly devoured the biography and I extracted detail upon detail from its many pages. I learned of his mother and father, of his wife whom he loved dearly, of his brothers and sisters. I learned of the birth of his children but was surprised to discover that his career and not his children dominated his life. Where was the grandfatherly care which was evident on the train? I discovered his work as an artist, the sculptures and paintings explained piece by revealing piece. And I confronted this fact and then that one, each of them masterfully related to the other and psychologically analyzed by the artistic biographer. One whole life packed into 277 fascinating pages.

I never learned if he liked his coffee black, white, decaffeinated or not at all. Maybe he preferred tea. Maybe his stomach acted up and he avoided coffee and tea altogether. Although he told me where he went to school he failed to mention who his best friends were, what kind of trendy clothes he wore, whether he let his hair grow daringly long and whether the bully terrorized him too or if he was the bully. I never really determined why he loved his wife so dearly or why his work was more important than his children. I don't know when he stopped remembering his wife's birthday. And why would he now take the time to care for his grandchild? I could guess but I didn't know. I imagine the biographer did her share of guessing. What did he speak of when he went out with friends? Did he laugh or blanch at a dirty joke? Did he really like that famous but obnoxious friend, was he the kind that could overlook obvious defects of character, or did he merely tolerate him for the social advantages conferred thereon? What did he dream? Did his wife fade out of his dreams and thoughts? What did he look like as a baby, was he a cute toddler? How did he look as a virile young man with a long mane of hair and a tan? What would he have done if he had met Gandhi, Einstein or Marilyn Monroe?

I have listed facts about this person as truly as I can remember. I omit the guesses, hunches, and fanciful projections of both the biographer and me. So here is the pitiful pile of facts laid beside the mountain that is him. I offer a few grains of sand but the person is a vast beach. I have made nothing up, embellished nowhere - these are grains of sand from that beach. I have truly described him but I haven't

really understood him. I can't get my descriptive fingers around him. Most of the few grains of sand that I can grab slip through my gaunt fingers.

I also believe that through experience and reason I have met and known God. He is the omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good creator of the universe. He is Spirit. Everything that is not God, depends upon Him for its existence. He is the source of truth, justice and beauty and is the giver of life.

I have also read about him in Scripture and in the Creeds of the church. The information culled therein has been summarized in one manner as follows: I believe in God the Father, Almighty. Maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, suffered under Pontius Pilate was crucified, died and was buried. The third day He rose again from the dead and was seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

But I don't know whether or not God is outside of time. I am so tenaciously time-bound that I don't have any idea what it might mean for a being to be outside of time and I don't know what God did prior to creation or what it would mean for that question to be non-sensical. I don't fully grasp the concept of omnipotence, omniscience, or perfect goodness. I understand the notion of powers, knowledge and goodness and have some ability to imaginatively expand properties beyond that possessed by mortals. But I cannot envision what the infinite possession of any property might be. I cannot fully conceive of a disembodied person, let alone one that is omnipresent. So God, too, slides out of my slippery cognitive grasp. He is infinitely grander than my finite within finite attempts to understand him. But, to the best of my ability, I have expressed truths, fallible and feeble, about God.

This much is sure: rocks infinitely exceed rock descriptions, people infinitely exceed people descriptions, gods infinitely exceed god descriptions.

II

God transcends the limits of human language; true enough. Yet this statement has recently taken a radical turn that implies that it is impossible to speak meaningfully about God at all. This is a turn inspired by the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who drew a sharp distinction between reality as we humans experience it, shaped by our human conceptual framework, and reality as it is in itself. John Hick, for example, draws a sharp distinction between the Real as it is in itself and the Real as humanly

experienced; we can only have cognitive access, according to Hick, to the Real as humanly experienced; the Real as it is in itself is mystery. The boundaries of meaningful human discourse, according to the Kantian theologian, are determined by empirically available concepts -- those that categorize what we can see, hear, touch, taste or smell. Since God cannot be captured by empirically available concepts, all talk about God trivializes and tempts one to blasphemy. Gordon Kaufman writes: "From Kant onward it has been understood that even the simplest experiences of objects are possible for us only because of the elaborate synthesizing powers of the mind: these enable us to bring together and hold together in enduring conceptual unities what is given to us only piecemeal and in separate moments of experience. How much more must pictures or conceptions of that 'ultimate reality' which is taken to ground and unify and comprehend all experience and being be a work of our constructive and synthesizing powers." Kaufman draws the extraordinary conclusion that the idea of God is "the mind's supreme imaginative construct."

The consequences of this Kantian view are extraordinary. We cannot know if God is really loving or hateful, righteous or wicked, concerned or unconcerned about human welfare or salvation, or even person or thing. Behind the veil of human language is, to use John Locke's fetching phrase, something-we-know-not-what. Paul Tillich went so far as to claim that it is inappropriate even to think of God as existing, as that would locate him as just another existent being amongst all other beings; of course, one wonders if he meant to ascribe to God the opposite of existence, which ascription, so it seems to me, would have severe consequences for theology. Is God so Wholly Other that we are invariably reduced to uttering and thinking nonsense concerning his true nature?

Let us distinguish two senses of "transcendent". A being is Radically Transcendent if that being is not humanly graspable because humanly available descriptive predicates do not apply to that being. If God is Radically Transcendent then it is impossible to conceive of God at all. But another definition of "transcendent" is possible: A being is Modestly Transcendent if that being is partially but not fully graspable by human concepts. A being is Modestly Transcendent if we cannot fully understand that being. One's understanding of a Modestly Transcendent being will prove, to various degrees, inadequate. Such a being transcends in the literal sense of going beyond whatever descriptive terms are predicated of it. Rocks and persons are Modestly Transcendent. Thus a being may Modestly Transcend experience but nonetheless be a proper object of experience. The central theological problem is whether or not God is Radically or Modestly Transcendent.

One might understand God's transcendence as implying that God is totally hidden and unknowable. God, according to Kaufman, is not available in our experience for observation, inspection, and description, hence God-talk is not directly referential; we cannot compare our image of God to the reality God to check for veracity. He claims however that we can compare ordinary objects of perception to reality to determine their veracity. Unfortunately the problem of comparing thoughts to reality is not peculiar to God; we do not have direct access to the ordinary world either, we must rely upon our beliefs. Our finite, human experience is fully consistent with either the solipsistic view that I am the only being that exists and everything that else is simply part of my experience or full-blooded realism, that a world not of my own making exists independently of the human mind. We cannot stand outside of our circle of beliefs and compare them to the reality in which they inhere. We are inescapably located within our categories of thought, some of which no doubt are determined solely by our socio-cultural conditioning. We cannot get, as Thomas Nagel puts it, the view from nowhere which allows us both access to our thoughts and to thought-independent reality to check how well our beliefs match up to that reality. Another, more theistic way of putting it, is that we can't get a God's eye view of our beliefs and reality. Either way of putting it, the problem remains -- we can't gain independent access to reality. The problem is not greater for God, as Kaufman alleges, it is rather the same for ordinary perceptual beliefs as it is for God. We do not have, either for beliefs about God or the external world, independent access to Reality to check their veracity. We have no privileged access to the World to settle the truth of perceptual or divine beliefs.

Are our ordinary beliefs, therefore, imaginative constructions? Are we reduced to living in a world of our (my) own making? Here our nature resists the skeptical conclusion. We are so constructed that we cannot help but believe that our perceptual beliefs correspond to a mind-independent reality. And here we can properly accede to our nature. Perhaps we have also been constructed to irresistibly acquire true beliefs of a mind-independent divine reality. Theologians such as John Calvin thought this was the case; Calvin taught that human beings had a *sensus divinitatis*, a sense of the divine, that caused belief in God to irresistibly well up within each person. No doubt such beliefs are easily distorted by human desire, emotion, or inclination; and our contingent socio-cultural location conditions us to view the divine in certain, predictable ways; indeed this may explain why there is such a bewildering assortment of competing, unreconcilable religious beliefs. The closer one gets to the fundamentally human, the more the pressures towards rational disagreement grow. We ought to expect rational disagreement concerning the social order and even moreso for the moral order. But it does not follow from

this disagreement that some are not closer than the truth than others. It may be difficult to rationally persuade cannibals that eating human flesh is immoral, but it does not follow that ultimate Morality is unknowable. Likewise, from the fact of religious diversity it does not follow that Reality is unknowable.

What does follow from these roughly Kantian musings is not skepticism about God but rather epistemological humility. We don't have access to the conditions which ground our beliefs in the world or God; indeed this may be a cognitive consequence of the fall. We are in the unenviable position of knowing many things but not knowing that we know; certainty is not within our grasp. Yet while we lack certainty, we may nonetheless possess knowledge. This may cause epistemological vertigo, especially for those constitutionally disposed towards certainty and rational consensus. Although this psychological state is deplorable, it is irreducibly part and parcel of the human condition.

III

What would our knowledge of God be like if God is Modestly Transcendent? Is our knowledge of God qualitatively different from our knowledge of rocks and persons? Our experienced slice of reality is slim, perhaps slimmer even than Kant realized. Nonetheless, slimness of grasp does not necessarily entail skepticism about reality, even the divine reality.

Consider the rock. The rock Modestly Transcends any mental conception that we have of it. Were we to devote our lives to the study of that one rock we would only grasp a minute bit of it. Were we to stare at it for days, each moment our perspective would be limited to one of the countless perspectives from which to view the rock; and we would be denied access to all past and future presentations of the rock. Its essence, its inner construction, its history and its future are all absent from our finite experience of the rock. The rock Modestly Transcends our experiences of it. So our idea of the rock, that enduring substance of countless unexperienceable permutations, is upon reflection a partly mental construct. We start with our transient experiences and add to them existence outside of our minds, location in space and time (if Kant is right), persistence in the absence of our perceptions, etc., etc. The rock is not to be identified with any of our experiences of it or even our complex idea of it. All of this is unquestionably true. What does not follow is that the rock is a purely imaginative construct. Our minds are actively involved in the cognizing of the rock as it categorizes in ways that vastly exceed our pale and frail immediate experiences. Indeed both the rock and our ideas of the rock vastly exceed what could be gleaned from the categorization of all past, present and

future human experience of it. But it would be folly to assert that the rock or even my idea of the rock is nothing more than an imaginative construct.

How about Ray? Ray, like the rock, Modestly Transcends any of my ideas of Ray. Ray, of course, is more complicated than a rock and his complications increase the pressure of transcendence; in addition to having physical properties and perspectives which are not accessible to any finite knower, Ray is a person and has a characteristic mental life of thoughts, desires and emotions; I can't see Ray's thoughts, feel his emotions or sense his desires. The problem of other minds looms large -- other minds are in principle beyond what humans can experience. Nonetheless we categorize Ray as a person, who persists through time, and who has experiences and an inner life beyond that which any person (including Ray) could fully grasp. So my idea of Ray is a product, to use Kaufman's phrase, of the elaborate synthesizing powers of the mind. But it doesn't follow from that that my idea of Ray is simply an imaginative construct. It does not follow that Ray is simply an imaginative construct or that my idea of

Ray captures nothing of the real Ray; my idea of Ray may be in part an imaginative construct, but Ray is not. And the reality of Ray vastly exceeds my idea of Ray, so I should not identify my idea of Ray with the reality of Ray. Nonetheless my limited perspective does allow some limited access to truths about Ray.

And, finally, what of God? Suppose there is a God. Is it possible for human beings to grasp truths about God or does divine transcendence make that impossible? If the Kantian theologians are right, even if there is a God who desires to make himself experientially and revelationally available to human beings, no one could know anything about God. Are they right?

I don't know of any non-question begging manner of settling this matter. Let me suggest, however, a possible means of proceeding. If we believe that we have been created in God's image then we will believe that we share some divine properties. It has been suggested that we are icons of God in that we are free, rational, moral, creative, social and knowers; if so, then God has similar properties but no doubt Modestly, yet infinitely, Transcends any human grasp of them. Consider God's causal powers: His causal powers vastly exceed those of mere humans, and God is able to directly bring about vastly more states of affairs than human beings. Yet God creates in the sense that God intends for something to be that isn't and then brings it about that it is and so do humans; God may do so, however, without using any pre-existing stuff. So, too, God is a knower; He has beliefs. Unlike humans all of His beliefs are true and the domain of divine beliefs is unrestricted and infinite; perhaps God knows everything directly whereby we must acquire many beliefs by inference. And God is possessed of a standard of goodness,

although His superiorities of knowledge and power render the actions expressive of divine goodness vastly different from those required of humans. And God is social, suggesting that contained within his nature is a multiplicity of persons who perfectly cooperate with one another. And so on.

I don't intend to defend a particular view of God-talk. I mean to suggest that people can justifiably believe that there is a being which has properties which are somewhat like but vastly exceed those possessed by humans: God is Modestly Transcendent. Because we are created in the divine image we share some properties with God and can rightly claim to know some of the divine properties. However, the plurality of beliefs about God and our awareness of the self's desire to believe what is to one's own advantage suggest the likelihood of humans to err in their understanding of God and so cautions us not to indulge in triumphalism, dogmatism or over-confidence. Modest Transcendence warns us not to turn our feeble beliefs about God into an idol.

So God is like both rocks and persons. Rocks and persons vastly exceeds my cognitive grasp. God, likewise, vastly exceeds my cognitive grasp. But Modest Transcendence does not entail that we cannot know anything at all about rocks, persons and gods. And it does not entail that the idea of God is, as the Kantian theologian contends, a mere mental construct. Of course I don't mean to suggest that there are no unique difficulties involved with talk about God. God is not just like a rock or a human person, but vastly exceeds both. However, to say that God vastly exceeds these things does not mean that he is more than modestly transcendent. It just means that the degree of inadequacy of our language is far greater when it comes to God. But that is consistent with affirming that we still know some truths about God, however great our ignorance may be. Modest Transcendence entails that we know very little about God (or rocks or persons), yet rather than a clarion call to Kantian agnosticism about the divine nature, it summons us to a quiet confidence concerning our tiny beliefs about God.

Modest transcendence is the claim that we can know little about God; that shouldn't come as a surprise, we also know little about rocks and persons. Rather than entailing skepticism about God, however, it is an affirmation both of knowledge of God and of human cognitive limitations; after all, although rocks and persons transcend our piddly conceptions of them we can still know and relate well to rocks and persons. Affirming modest transcendence places us securely in the tradition of the greatest Christian thinkers. Augustine held that God is like a vast ocean: even the unlearned can paddle about in the shallows and the trained theologian can swim out a bit further; but both are of such limited ability that they

would be swallowed up in the depths. Aquinas contended that because of the disproportion of our finite intellect and God's infinitude, our knowledge of God is "dark and mirrored and from afar." Kirkegaard maintained that there is an "infinite qualitative difference" between humans and God and that humans, due to their sinful nature, are tempted to domesticate God to make Him serve them. All three magisterial thinkers affirmed divine transcendence yet also held that we can know enough about God to relate to him properly. God is modestly transcendent -- we can gain sufficient information for salvation; but God is transcendent -- we must beware of the human temptation to turn God into a glorified human being or an omnipresent buddy. Modest transcendence is a threat both to the theological liberal who wallows in utter ignorance of the divine but also to the theological conservative who arrogantly asserts, and perhaps wields such knowledge to divide and conquer, what is beyond her ken. We can embrace or be embraced by God but only as chastened by intellectual humility.