Walker Percy's Existential Endings and the Meaning of Life

by Karey Perkins

THE PROBLEM

Walker Percy, the scientist, wanted to find a cohesive and decisive explanatory theory for human beings. He believed humans are more than organisms in an environment, more than integrated personalities, more even than "mature and creative" individuals. They are wayfarers and pilgrims.

Percy sees humans seeking something beyond material existence and mere physical survival, for something that cannot be grasped solely by science's empirical verification or behaviorism. Although, ironically, Percy's psychological explorations were a direct result of his science background (as a medical student, he said that he might have been a psychiatrist if not a pathologist), and many of his main characters are psychiatrists – he still believed psychology and psychiatry based in dyadic science could not suffice either. A materialist viewpoint cannot take into account any existential, ontological need.

He further observed that our culture is riddled with conflicting and competing theories resonating through our social fabric and our confused and divided American consciousness – both individual and group. We no longer have an accepted coherent or adequate view of humankind or the universe. In this background of the lack of a mutually agreed upon paradigm, he found science's prevailing physicalist, materialist, biological model for understanding human beings to be incomplete:

> …time ran out and the old modern world ended and the old monster theory no longer works. Man knows he is something more than an organism in an environment, because for one thing he acts like anything but an organism in an environment. Yet he no longer has the means of understanding the traditional Judeo-Christian teaching that the "something more" is a soul somehow locked in the organism like a ghost in a machine. What is he then? He has not the faintest idea…. When man doesn't know whether he is an organism or a soul or both, and if both how he can be both, it is good to start with what he does know. This book [The Message in the Bottle] is about two things, man's strange behavior and man's strange gift of language, and about how understanding the latter might help understanding the former. (MB 9)

Percy eventually found human language ability to be the key to his search: he felt current anthropological theories had failed, and so he sought to create a "radical anthropology," based on human capacity for language.

THE THEISTIC EXISTENTIALISTS

He gets there first, however, through the existentialists, bypassing the usual 20th century solution, psychiatrists. His existential search led to his Catholic conversion which led to his apologist endeavors (by way of language). While he read most of the existentialists, including the atheists Camus and Sartre, the two main influences most often cited on Percy's existential philosophy, especially as seen in his novels, were the theistic existentialists Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel.

KIERKEGAARD

Walker Percy was profoundly affected by Kierkegaard's thoughts, and Percy's characters and themes reveal this influence in all his novels. Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher who lived from 1813 to 1855, is often considered the father of existentialism. He wrote on the nature and existence of human beings, considering, as Percy does, the question of who we are and why we are here.

A devout Christian, Kierkegaard also extensively considers faith and the individual's relationship with God. Kierkegaard, the author, employed irony to get his points across, using narrators of many different pseudonyms with diverse personalities, and both fiction and non-fiction formats to accomplish his goal of conveying his thoughts without teaching or preaching. His thoughts anticipated those of other pivotal thinkers of this time and beyond, including Sigmund Freud and Jean-Paul Sartre. Many of Freud's ideas such as the "pleasure principle," the "death drive," and the reason man "sins" echo Kierkegaard's philosophy. A summary of Kierkegaard's contributions includes the concepts of "dread," "despair," "rotation," and "repetition," all of which Percy writes about in detail in his non-fiction, and mirrors in his fiction. Other concepts are "the double movement of infinity," that is, that of the "knight of infinite resignation" and the "knight of faith."

Percy, the scientist who liked systematization, was particularly attracted to Kierkegaard's three "stages on life's way" - the aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres. Percy's novels often end with his protagonists making the movement from one stage to the next, usually apparently, aesthetic to ethical. Kierkegaard's stages are developmental; one must travel through each.

The first stage, the "aesthetic stage," is the stage in which an individual acts in such a way that will bring pleasure or happiness to him or herself, which is the main motivation and concern. Some may call this a "hedonist" stage, though hedonism takes many different forms, as does the aesthetic stage, which has different stages within it. The lowest aesthetic stage is that of the least sophisticated individual, one who exists merely to satisfy his physical senses. This may take the form of self-indulgence and an "eat, drink, and be merry" philosophy or a "wine, women, and song" lifestyle, or today's equivalent, "sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll." Have fun and enjoy the moment. Higher up but still within the aesthetic stage is the "busy man of affairs" as Kierkegaard calls him. This man is still living for a worldly and selfish pleasure, but instead of the pleasure of the physical senses, the pleasure is that of success in the world, such as making a clever business deal. Engaging in activities in the world that bring success to self, in whatever way one defines that, is still motivated by the pleasure of that success for one's self gain, so remains part of the aesthetic stage. The highest level of the aesthetic stage is more aristocratic – that of the cultivated sophisticate. The appreciation of culture including art, music, and literature may be more refined than the lower levels, but is still motivated by pleasure and pleasure-seeking. (This is not to say that appreciation, study, and/or mastery of art is to be eschewed, just that the pursuit of art for self-pleasure is not the realization of the fullness of art's purpose.)

The transition from one Kierkegaardian stage to the next also has certain characteristics. The aesthetic stage, characterized by the pursuit of pleasure as the motivation for one's actions and one's purpose, eventually leads to satiety and boredom. Eventually the sought after-pleasure ceases to satisfy, like eating too much cake – one loses one's appetite for it. So the individual seeks a solution. The solution, if he chooses to remain an aesthete, is "rotation." The aesthete constantly "rotates" the roles, the places, and the people in his life to avoid commitment(s) to any one particular thing or person or role in life. By remaining outside of life as a spectator of life, the aesthete can continually pursue new and different experiences of the generalized abstraction of the chosen pleasure and discard them once

he becomes bored, moving on to a new one. For example, the generalized abstraction of “beautiful woman” may be filled by any beautiful woman that walks by, but just as easily discarded for the next one, who also satisfies the abstraction. The particulars of each individual woman are irrelevant. Careers or jobs may also be rotated, discarded once they cease to become amusing; as can places – with the aesthete moving from place to exotic or more desirable place, abandoning one when it becomes dull for something else that seems more adventurous or interesting. In this way, the aesthete avoids intense pleasures or pains associated with close intimacy and commitment (whether to a love, a friend, a cause, a role, a place, a community); therefore, he must continually distract himself with variety of pleasures, experiences, persons and/or vocations. As one might guess, even this solution disintegrates into a cynical apathy, and to the aesthete's conclusion that all actions lead to regret. The aesthete has been merely role-playing up to this point and reveals to no one his true, inner self; in fact, he has no true, inner self to reveal at this point. The multiple roles are pleasurable distractions for his own narcissistic satisfaction, but are no reflection of a caring or investment in any of these apparent choices. In reality, his inner self is a splintered, fragmented one. Rather than being free of society's dictates as the aesthete thinks he is, he inadequately defines himself by a multiplicity of socially defined roles, all of which are incoherent and complicated in the one person. Stated harshly, his life is a masquerade of role-playing to hide his inner emptiness.

The successful transition to the second stage, the ethical stage, is characterized by a “leap”: if he aesthete is to leave the aesthetic stage and move to the next, he must abandon this early stage blindly, and take a "leap." The individual loses his or her own self, not yet knowing what new self will be created. Until this point, the aesthete has been "morally neutral" in that choices are not in the ethical realm; it is not that one chooses evil over good, but that one is not even in the sphere of good and evil.

In the leap to the next stage, the aesthete will choose to enter the realm of good and evil, where every choice is a moral one – for good or for bad – which did not even "exist" for the aesthete before. The leap to the ethical stage is the result of the distracted aesthete, tired of "rotation," making a commitment to one particular role in relationship to persons, society, and all of life. For Kierkegaard, at this point, any commitment will suffice (he advocates no one particular dogma or cause or religion or person at this point), as long it is both a commitment to self-perfection as well as a commitment to other human beings. The ethical person now has a genuine and non-fragmented identity, role, and place in life, defined by his commitment to others and self. He or she has now chosen himself whereas before, in the aesthetic stage, there was no self behind the empty and transient role. In addition, instead of acting for self-pleasure, one's actions in the role are motivated by the commitment to others and caring for the well-being of others. So, the person in the ethical stage considers the needs of others and community when making decisions. A businessperson in the ethical stage operates not for the thrill of the deal, selfish gain, or social accolades (as in the aesthetic stage), but for the benefit of community and society. At this point, every decision that the individual makes is an ethical one. The aesthete might have to decide between steak or fish for dinner, or between wearing a suit or sweats to work, but no ethical implications are involved for him. In the ethical stage, the ethics and effects of the situation on others and the world (which is determined by the role or commitment one has chosen) enter into every decision the individual makes.

Percy’s New Mexico “Ground Zero” experience after years of wandering fostered such a realization within himself. His decision to commit to a career of writing and to a wife and to a home in New Orleans was his personal leap from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage. His protagonists in his first three novels make this same movement at the end of each of these novels; Kierkegaard’s journey

through the aesthetic stage and finally, the leap to the ethical stage is Percy's primary theme in the first half of his fictional works. Percy says:

> I want to pay due homage to Kierkegaard. Insofar as one thinks in a philosophical frame of reference, when I was writing *The Moviegoer*, also *The Last Gentleman*, and maybe also *Love in the Ruins,* I was thinking in terms of the three spheres of existence. It is a very convenient frame of reference, particularly when you are writing a novel of quest, pilgrimage, or search about a young man "on life's way," as Kierkegaard would say, to think of him going through the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and then the religious. Although most of the novels are about the aesthetic stage. (Con I 203)

So Percy, whose first three novels are about this movement from the aesthetic stage into the ethical, seems to have his protagonists enter into this ethical stage at the novels' end by way of marriage. Percy says, "I think that Kierkegaard regarded marriage as the highest state of ethical existence" (Con I 48). However, Kierkegaard does not feel marriage is primary in the next stage, the religious stage. All
heroes of Percy's novels (except Will Barrett, protagonist of the second novel), marry or commit to a woman and community at the end. Percy's own journey from aesthetic to ethical ended in a marriage and a family, a home in a permanent place, and a commitment to a career of writing. His wanderings had ended; his wayfaring had begun.

For Kierkegaard, however, the individual's spiritual journey does not end with the ethical stage. Commitment to others, to a "cause," to a mission or purpose, to our "role" in this life, whatever we have chosen that to be, must eventually give way to the ultimate commitment – to God. If the individual's commitment to others and to his role in the world remains primary and all that there is for him, these obligations then become "god" for him. These must be given up for the transcendent God. While Kierkegaard sees marriage as the highest state of the ethical sphere, in the religious stage, the believer must be ready to give up everything for God, even marriage. In fact, he must give up any relationship in the religious stage, and the entire world itself. This leap of faith into the religious sphere is much more difficult than the first leap from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere. Before, the aesthete gave up a poor sense of self and spiritually unfulfilling life for a better one; in the second leap, a good and rewarding life is sacrificed for nothing else but God.

This can perhaps best be exemplified with the biblical story about the "rich young ruler" who comes to Christ and asks how he can enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ responds that he must obey the commandments. The rich young ruler answers that he has, and Christ knows that he is a good man (ethical stage) and is ready for the next stage of spiritual growth (religious stage). So Jesus asks the man to give up everything he has, and come and follow him (Christ). The young man walks away in disappointment, for he cannot make this leap of faith. (Christ's response: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." [Matthew 19:24])

Does commitment to God contradict or conflict with living an ethical life in this world? Does following God ever get in the way of commitments to others and society? Kierkegaard answers unequivocally in the affirmative. He calls this the "Teleological Suspension of the Ethical" and believes that faith in God is logically absurd, but absolutely essential for true being. Percy says that, for Kierkegaard, "Faith is not a form of knowledge, it is a leap into the absurd" (Con I 204).

Others, including Walker Percy himself as well as theistic existentialist Gabriel Marcel, disagree with Kierkegaard on this point. Percy says, “It is the classical dispute between Catholics and Protestants whether faith is a form of knowledge… Aquinas [says]… faith is a form of knowledge. It is different from scientific knowing, but it is a form of knowledge. I tend to agree with Aquinas there” (Con I 204). However, Kierkegaard's argument for the absurd ironically makes a kind of logical sense from one point of view. If we are unwilling to sacrifice ALL, everything in this life, including commitments to others and including ethics, for God, then those things are still “before” (in front of or more important than) commitment to God.

Kierkegaard uses the story of Abraham and Isaac to illustrate his point. Perhaps the strongest commitment or bond of love a human can have is that of parent and child; for a father, too (especially in Abraham's day and culture), the son represents the father's future and "immortality" (through descendants) in this world. There is nothing greater in the world that Abraham could sacrifice, yet he is asked by God to sacrifice his son. Abraham goes to the mountaintop with Isaac and builds the altar; at the last minute, he is stopped by God. Abraham has passed the test of faith; his ultimate commitment is to God. However, his actions which were right in the religious stage seemed absurd in the ethical stage: God's commandment to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was requiring him to act like a murderer. This is Kierkegaard’s “teleological suspension of the ethical”; however, it does not abolish the ethical. The suspension is only temporary.

This is what Kierkegaard means by the "knight of infinite resignation" and "knight of faith." Abraham is the knight of infinite resignation in that he is willingly resigned to lose everything he has for God – his son, his future, and even his ethics. He is willing to renounce the world, himself, and even his position as a moral agent. Yet he is the knight of faith because he never gives up hope in God. He believes God's promise and goodness, though it was not logical given what he was asked to do. He believes two mutually exclusive ideas at the same time, what Kierkegaard calls "divine madness." This is Kierkegaard's "double movement of infinity." The wisdom of God is foolishness to the world.

As much as Percy admired the Protestant Kierkegaard, he did not find faith irrational as Kierkegaard did. He says, “I was always put off by Kierkegaard’s talk about inwardness, subjectivity, and the absurd, and the leap into the absurd. I didn’t think it was necessary to go that far” (Con I 120). Kierkegaard also abandoned the world, life, and people to find God; the liberal Catholic theologians that Percy began to study found the world and community the ground through which God’s presence is manifested. Percy’s conversion was intellectual, based in and a product of a process of careful reason, as well as faith and grace (Tolson 198). In the end, it was theologian Gabriel Marcel’s Catholicism, not Kierkegaard’s Protestantism, that shaped his theology – and his fiction - more.

MARCEL

Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), the second major existential influence on Percy, is a theistic existentialist as Kierkegaard is, but differs in his vision of what faith is. Marcel is French, a Jew, and a Catholic convert, and Percy too was a Catholic convert. Marcel’s Catholic viewpoint resonated more with Percy than Kierkegaard’s otherworldly, more abstract, Protestant stance. While Kierkegaard sees the "knight of infinite resignation" sacrificing community and earthly relationships in the journey to God, Marcel sees the opposite. Faith is not irrational; the individual is not in isolation. For Marcel, the community and relationship with others are vastly important, and, in fact, are the medium through which transcendent faith is found and lived.

Since Marcel sees the human spirit in social context, one of his main concerns is the state of modern society and its effect on modern man. Like Percy, Marcel believes modern man is not at ease with himself – a stranger to himself – and one of the reasons for this is the loss of the "ontological" sense in the modern world. Humans are no longer valued for their ontological worth; they are valued for their "functional" worth. Ontologically, humans have value just by virtue of the fact that they exist, that they are born and live. There is simply a sacredness of being that is what gives dignity and worth to the individual.

In modern society, however, individuals are valued not for the sacredness of their being, for the fact that they simply ARE; they are valued instead for what they DO. They are valued functionally. Human worth is the same thing as their work – what they produce and contribute to the world. A functionalized world is one that emphasizes "process without a purpose, utilization of means with no clearly defined end, a journey without a goal" (Keen 10). In a functionalized world, we are busy creatures filling up time with "productive" activities that have no real ontological purpose. With the loss of the ontological sense, there is a loss of a sense of mystery and wonder in life and the world. The functional orientation to life is more concerned with "having" than "being." A side by side comparison shows the difference:

ONTOLOGICAL	**FUNCTIONAL**
Being	Having
Participation	Objectification
Mystery	Problem
Presence	Object
I-Thou relationships	I-It relationships
Thought which stands in the presence of....	Thought which proceeds by interrogation
Concrete thinking	Abstraction
Secondary reflection	Primary reflection

Marcel associates functional thinking with technological thinking. Like Heidegger, Marcel sees technology, in and of itself, as morally neutral. It is when technological thinking deteriorates into "technomania" and "technolatry" that there is a loss of the ontological sense. Technological thinking causes an anthropocentric world view – a loss of humility, that is, a pride that man's technological products and an inadequate scientific worldview, i.e.: scientism, are the answers to life and to all knowledge – which is Percy's complaint against and rejection of "scientism" (not science itself or the scientific method however). One then becomes one's own source of meaning and value to life, a solipsistic and unacceptable view for Percy.

In addition, technology has created a loss of particularity and individuality and uniqueness and intimacy to real people and concrete places. We live in a society of mass production, standardized products, brand names, and uniform workers. There is a Starbucks on every street corner; a McDonald's in every country. The loss of concrete particular and unique identity results in a "spirit of abstraction." Like technology, abstraction itself can be useful – it is necessary for reason and thought. It helps us to theorize and to order and understand the world. However, it becomes negative and dangerous when the concreteness from which it arises is lost. Sam Keen explains:

> When we forget that the enemy whom we may be forced to kill in war is an individual human being with hopes and fears, that the 'schizophrenic' is a unique person whom no diagnostic categories wholly fit, that a flower that can be understood in scientific terms is also a thing of beauty existing in its own right, we yield to the fascination of abstraction and betray a contempt for concrete reality. (13-14)

Percy believes, like Marcel, that it is abstraction, generalization, functionalization, and the loss of the particular individual that sends modern humans astray.

Percy's appreciation of nature is another indication of the Marcellian manifestation of the human need to be in the reality and presence of the physical world and not be divorced from it. Nature suffuses Percy's novels. He does not split spirit from world any more than he splits mind from body. Percy's theology, as much as he used Kierkegaard's stages, is ultimately far more similar to Marcel's. Interviewer Bradley R. Dewey explains:

> In Kierkegaard's view, there seems to be a narrow vertical line straight up and down from God to man, not touching the believer's earthly surroundings at all. How strikingly different it is for Percy. His novels are suffused with nature. No fewer than twelve species of birds appear in The Moviegoer. We are kept constantly, but gently, aware of the look of the sky, sounds, smells, the feel of things. (Con I 123)

Kierkegaard had "stark landscapes" (Dewey, Con I 123), as one's earthly surroundings are unimportant and superfluous to faith in Protestant theology. Percy is more like the Catholics – both Marcel and Gerard Manley Hopkins. "It is as if the whole universe is filled with grace. It's not just gracious Jesus, which is so Protestant," Percy says of Hopkins' writing (Con I 124). Of his own writing, Percy says it is a "consciously Catholic attitude toward nature – nature, created nature, as a sacramental kind of existence" (Con I 124). Such an orientation is directly opposed to the mind-body split of the Enlightenment; in Percy's view, the Catholics, before and after Descartes, have always had it right in this way.

While Kierkegaard's religious stage would require the believer to give up the entire world, including all earthly relationships (if asked by God), for Marcel and for Percy the opposite is true. Not only is the physical nature of this world a kind of sacrament, a conduit to the transcendent, but relationships and community also are a medium of this world, through which God is lived and experienced. By entering into a commitment of fidelity to another person and of service to a community, the believer enters into a life of the religious sphere, the life of faith and service to God.

CONCLUSION: THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION

This is the end to all of Percy's novels– the protagonist wanders and searches throughout the books, for "God" we presume, only to apparently "chuck it all" and find himself, at the end of the novel, settling down with a good woman in a leafy enclave. As interviewer J. Gerald Kennedy said, to which Percy answered in the affirmative: "In other words, essentially what you're interested in is in the wandering and the searching and being in doubt, but once the character makes his commitment, that's the time when you've got to hit the road and end the book" (Con I 234). Percy admitted his characters "did mostly get married. It seems that the nearest approximation, humanly speaking, of happiness is love. You would like your characters to get out of whatever fix they were in and achieve some kind of happiness. The best way to do it, the easiest way to do it, is to fall in love" (Con II 107).

But what of the search for God and meaning? Wasn't that the whole point of the novels?

The Kierkegaard-Marcel dichotomy answers this question: Percy does not foresee his protagonists eventually abandoning their community or nature to have the ultimate union with God in isolation as they progress out of Kierkegaard's ethical sphere into the religious. In fact, it is through Marcellian commitment to and growth in the world, body, and community that God is found.

The Moviegoer ends with Binx's commitment to Kate, and in the final scene he is seen as the father figure for his nieces and nephews, including the Christ figure in the book, Lonnie – the movie ending of "everydayness" that he deplores at the beginning of the book. Binx's transformation at the end is marked, like Lonnie's life, by sacraments and participation in sacraments, including the communal sacrament of marriage. Binx's commitment to others becomes his grace and his sacrament. His commitment to others is also a commitment to God – he creates the closest community– an intimate one, a family, not an abstract or anonymous one. The presence of sacraments at the end indicates this is not an Kierkegaardian ethical realm, but a Marcellian religious one. But, it is to be differentiated from Walter's and Aunt Emily's stage two ethical commitment to achievement and contribution – he is not doing so out of a desire to make a contribution to society – that ends only there, with itself. Percy explains: "But in the end – and we're using Kierkegaardian terminology here – Binx jumps the aesthetic clear across the ethical to the religious. He had no ethical sphere at all. That's what Aunt Emily can't understand about him" (Con I 66). Binx's religious stage must be differentiated from Kierkegaard's, however. It is through commitment to people in one's life that commitment to God is experienced. The novel itself ends with Binx's servanthood to Kate and his family: "I watch her walk toward St. Charles, cape jasmine held against her cheek, until my brothers and sisters call out behind me" (MG 242).

Gabriel Marcel's relational spirituality captures this idea better than Kierkegaard's stage three asceticism and rejection of others and the world. Through relationship with the people in Binx's life – a true affirmation and embracing of "this world" and the people of this world – he experiences the grace of God. The Marcellian religious stage is a connection to something transcendent out of which flows connections to this world and to those inhabitants in it, which then become fertile ground for further connection to the transcendent. In Binx's commitment to Kate, to Lonnie, to his family, he lives out his love for God. The aesthete's distractions are gone: Sharon and Joyce are gone – Kate is chosen. "The playground is deserted" (MG 231).. The playground of life is empty, he realizes, and he no longer finds satisfaction in distracting himself with other women or meaningless activities – he is going to build a Marcellian community in marriage and family, where he can live out fidelity to and love of God through faithfulness to and love of his wife and family, where Binx finds his true place and purpose.

The Last Gentleman is the only of Percy's novels that doesn't end in marriage and community, but even in this novel Percy later says in an interview that he assumed Will married Kitty. As for Will's aloneness at the end of *The Last Gentleman* (though he does reach out to Sutter Vaught), Percy ascribes it to Will being "sicker" than the others, though he speculates that, after the novel is over, "Of course he married Kitty Barrett [sic], and I think maybe he lived tolerably. But who knows?" (Con I 48).

In Dr. Thomas More's confessional with the priest in Percy's *Love in the Ruins*, the priest tells More to pray for sorrow, then teaches him that, in the end, focusing on the plight of one's own soul – ones' own life – is far less important than other things:

Meanwhile, forgive me but there are other things we must think about: like doing our jobs, you

> being a better doctor, I being a better priest, showing a bit of ordinary kindness to people, particularly our own families – unkindness is such a pitiful thing – doing what we can for our poor unhappy country – things which, please forgive me, sometimes seem more important than dwelling on a few middle-aged daydreams. (LR 399).

For Percy the solution is not found in self-actualization so popular in the seventies when he wrote this novel. It is found in living the Marcellian way – through focusing on serving and loving others around us, not for our own gratification or accomplishment, but for their needs, forgetting our own self-centered "daydreams" and longings. More abandons his bevy of three girlfriends socked away in the motel, and chooses one to marry.

In *Lancelot,* Lance finds his salvation and his sanity in abandoning his abstract cause, his third revolution, and planning the more concrete path to settle down together with Anna and her daughter in her cabin in Virginia, creating a family.

Percy's writings continually emphasize the unity and inseparability of mind/spirit with the body/the physical world – and that answers can never be found directly through spiritual abstractions, nor solely through the Cartesian mind divorced from the body. In *The Second Coming*, we see the most literal rejection of Kierkegaard's abstraction when Will Barrett, in a misguided scientific experiment, goes alone and isolated into a cave seeking a scientific answer to the question of God's existence. God's answer is delivered through the body, earth, nature itself - a toothache, literally driving him from an abstraction in his mind right back into his body. Will says, "What kind of answer is this to an elegant scientific question?" (SC 224). God's reply is nature's lesson that abstract scientific generalities are not the answer – but rather, it is the particular relationship lived out in the world, through the body. (The next step in Will's journey is to quite literally "fall" into a relationship with a woman as he falls through the hole in the cave into Ally's greenhouse home.). At the end, Ally and Will end up together, planning a life together, along with building a community with Will's compatriots in the hospital.

The Thanatos Syndrome also ends in protagonist More recommitting to his wife, Ellen.

Like Marcel, Percy believed the human love that his heroes find at the end of his novels (first marriage, then community) is a manifestation of, and a mirror of, a greater divine love. That human love is a conduit through which his characters experience God in human life. The subject of all his novels is his protagonists' search for this love. Percy says, "Life is a mystery, love is a delight. …one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight, i.e.: God" (Con I 175). The divine is interwoven within his characters' earthly love. His protagonists create a fabric of life, in a leafy enclave of human love in which grows divine love and grace.

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