

# COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE



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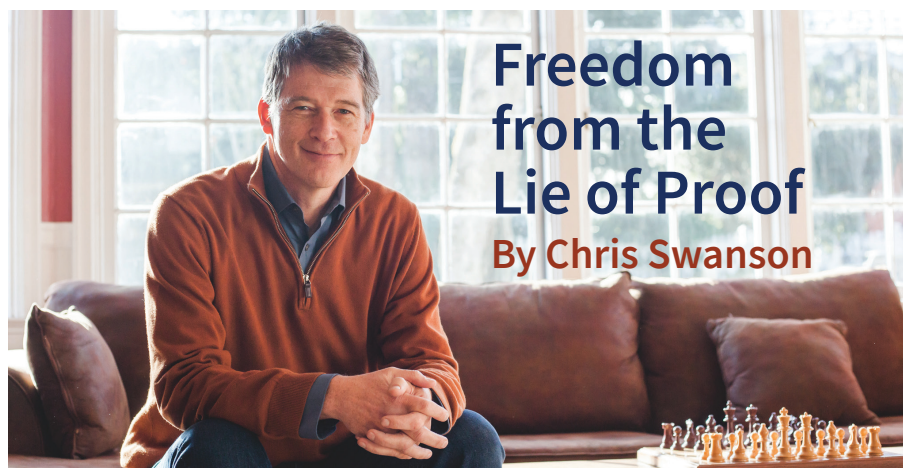
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## Freedom from the Lie of Proof

By Chris Swanson

As a teacher, I have the privilege of reading the works of many great mathematicians and scientists with my students. As we study these works, one theme always comes up: proof and certain knowledge. Some mathematicians and scientists, as well as philosophers, are seeking certain knowledge. Strangely, though, others claim that little, if anything, is knowable. Over time their ideas have produced in our culture a perspective on knowledge which, if taken to its conclusion, is deeply confusing and problematic.

These thinkers have created a world that allows and even encourages us to have radically conflicting perspectives about knowledge depending on the context. For example, in some circumstances, we describe something as “unknowable.” At other times, we confidently claim we have knowledge of “objective” and “undeniable” truths that everyone should agree with. Sometimes, science is the source of truth. After all, the physical world is measurable, testable, predictable, and knowable. However, when science challenges our cherished beliefs (often but not always religious in nature), we will ignore, doubt, or undermine science’s claims.

The flow of ideas from these influential thinkers has brought us to a point where knowledge is suspect. Thus, we as a culture are less likely to attempt to engage each other in debates about what is true, wondering if such a thing as “truth” even exists. The experts don’t agree, and everyone has an agenda, so what is the point? We have arrived at a time when the questions that haunt the thoughts of our culture are not questions about truth and falsehood, knowledge versus ignorance. Rather, they are questions about

action, application, and experience. Doing supersedes knowing.

How did we get here? I propose that our current situation is rooted in this single core assumption that has animated the cultural conversation of the West: *knowledge is that which is proved*. This simple assumption is the source from which our troubles began. But this assumption is a lie.

We all intuit the falsehood of the lie because we don’t actually prove much of anything and yet we know lots of things. For example, we know the meanings of simple sentences like “the shirt is red” or “the dog is hungry.” We do not need a proof to be convinced. But despite this, we feel the power of the lie to the point that we generally accept it as obvious: “Of course knowledge consists of things that have been proven.”

This lie, that the standard of knowledge requires proof, provides the seed for all manner of confusion, doubt, and lack of discernment. In the end, since almost nothing is provable, everything is equally believable.

Even though the whole history of “knowing” in the West—from Socrates to Nietzsche—seems to embrace this lie in some form or another, one source denies it. The Bible utterly undermines the “lie of the proof” and presents us with a better view of knowledge grounded in our humanity.

Normally we don’t think about the Bible as a book that sets forth a theory of knowledge. After all, the Bible is about God and God’s relationship to mankind. If you want a theory of knowledge, read Aristotle, Descartes, or Kant. But the Bible *does* have an implicit view of knowing woven into every story, poem,

prayer, and prophesy. The Bible's view is definitively not the "knowledge requires proof" theory. The biblical record never gives us a systematic, axiomatic, logical set of statements that can be verified by testing or reason. The Bible never "proves" anything, nor does it seem to expect "knowledge" to satisfy a burden of proof. Instead, the Bible presents a view of knowing in which a *relationship* exists between the knower and the known.

To understand the Bible's way of knowing, let us think about what it means to know a person. Knowing a person is very different from knowing a fact—a distinction expressed in many languages. For example, in German and Spanish, the two kinds of knowing are differentiated as *kennen* versus *wissen* and *conocer* versus *saber*. When I know a person, say Mike, it means that I have learned about Mike's behavior, personality, interests, and loves. I recognize the way he looks and sounds and perhaps how he walks or laughs. I have had lots of experiences with Mike that give me a knowledge of him. In knowing Mike, I never "prove" anything. There are no tests or logical derivations. Mike is a person *with whom I have a relationship*, not a statement or claim that needs verifying.

Now it is true that my knowledge of Mike is necessarily incomplete and possibly flawed. I may think that Mike will behave one way when he behaves the other. Does that mean that I don't know Mike? Not really. I can know Mike without being able to predict everything about him. The *potential* for error is not the same as lack of knowledge. It is only within the "knowledge requires proof" view that the potential for error must be ruled out. In fact, the desire to remove doubt has been the driving force behind the "knowledge requires proof" perspective.

That is all fine and good about Mike, but what does it have to do with other types of knowledge? We don't "have a relationship" with a math formula or the fact that George Washington was the first president, right? Or do we? I certainly do not have the *same* relationship with Mike that I have with a math formula, but I do have a relationship. With Mike, I can recall a wide variety of mutual experiences. He is a person, and our relationship is two-directional. My math formula is different; it will not ask me out for coffee.

But there is a sense in which I do have a one-directional relationship with a math formula. That relationship is also based on a wide variety of experiences and memories, as well as a commitment of belief. My relationship to the math formula is formed by my many past uses of it. I remember it and how to use it. I have a positive attitude toward it since my mastery of it makes me feel capable. I am also committed to its truth; if someone were to claim the math formula were wrong, I would resist. Thus I have a "relationship" with the math formula, and it is a part of who I am and what I think. I don't question it, but I believe it.

But if knowledge is a relationship, how do we avoid mistakes? Don't proof, evidence, and reason help us avoid the pitfalls of error? Weren't proofs invented for this very reason—to avoid that which is untrue? Certainly, proof, evidence, and reason are tools we can use as we build our relationships with what we know. But they never have—and never will—protect us from error.

This relationship of connections and belief is central to all of my knowledge, whether I am talking about a person or an insignificant fact. Such relationships could be rich and multifaceted or they could be shallow. For instance, my relationship with Mike will be shallow if I have only met him once. The same is true for a math formula I barely remember and have rarely used. But this sort of relational knowledge is what ultimately matters. Whether or not I can prove

something—this has far less impact on my life than the relationship that I have with that something. And it is exactly this sort of knowledge that the Bible urges us toward over and over again.

The primary relationship that God is concerned about is our relationship with Him. He wants from us belief and commitment. He creates experiences to help us remember Him and His character. You can pick nearly any part of the Bible, and God's call to trust Him shines through. Consider just a few examples: the Exodus, the Psalms, and the teachings of Jesus.

In the Exodus, God gives the Israelites *the* formative experience for His people. He wants to get their attention. "Israelites," He says, "this is who I am. I am who I am. I am a God of salvation. I am a God who cares about you. I am faithful to my promises. I did not do just *one* miracle; I did *many* miracles so that you would remember. I set up feasts, rituals, and symbols to help you remember. I will recreate the Exodus over and over by saving you repeatedly from your enemies and ultimately from yourselves."

In the story of the Exodus, God is developing a relationship with the Israelites so that the nation of Israel will know Him and trust Him and believe that He is who He says He is. The Exodus does not provide a set of logical proofs. The miracles were not proofs of the existence of God. Rather, they were powerful experiences that affected the souls of individual Israelites in deeply personal and emotional ways. *(continued on page 4)*



### Welcome Freshmen!

Adam, Levi, Rowan, Sofia, Abigail, and Rachel



# Freedom from the Lie of Proof

continued from page 3

Consider next the Psalms. The Psalms are poems or songs sung by the Israelites in a way that impacted their communal life. In many of the Psalms, the Psalmist cries out for help or laments his situation. Nearly always, that cry or lament is followed by a powerful reminder of God's love, power, or faithfulness. Each Psalm captures some experience in the Psalmist's life that describes a relationship with God. The Psalm communicates about God in an experiential, artistic, relational way. What the Psalms never do is to logically analyze the philosophical coherence of a biblical view of the world. God does not offer a proof because He does not want merely analytical adherence to statements. He wants our souls, and the Psalms speak to our souls.

Finally, consider Jesus' ministry. Jesus is not creating a systematic theology or an apologetics for belief. If He were, He would not speak in parables and oblique but pregnant sayings. No, Jesus is always *talking* to people. He addresses people where they are in their situation and asks them to follow Him. Whether it is Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the Pharisees, or the disciples, Jesus speaks and acts in such a way as to invite these people to trust and believe in Him, and in so doing, to trust and believe in the Father. Jesus is asking people to have a relationship with Him. He does miracles not just for the sake of proving something but rather for the same reason God did them with Israel: to get their attention. Like the Father's, Jesus's first and central message is "Repent." Repentance is not an intellectual thing; it is a matter of one's soul.

Our culture is blighted by the lie that "knowledge requires proof." It ravages our politics, ethics, economics, and relationships. Calvin in a *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon (October 2, 1995) captures the dysfunction perfectly. When his mother catches him, he tries to escape guilt: "I didn't do it. I didn't throw that! You can't prove I threw it!" Psychologically, this belief that knowledge requires proof plagues us with doubt and despair. If so many things are unprovable, what can I know? We have all heard that "you can't

prove that God exists" and its apparent rebuttal, "but you can't prove that He doesn't." Some people believe that we are part of some elaborate virtual reality like the Matrix or that aliens started life on earth. Since we can't disprove it, maybe it is true. What can I believe? How should I act? What if I am wrong? These are fears that we speak only in secret because they are troubling and unsolvable.

God knows us better even than we know ourselves. He knows that we doubt and that we, like Calvin, use that doubt to avoid responsibility for what is plain to see. That is why He has gone to so much effort to tell us about Himself in the Scriptures. He is asking for us to

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## Like Little Children

By Erin Greco

This talk by house manager Erin Greco was originally given at the 2025 House Retreat for Gutenberg College's Residence Program.

I would like to talk about weakness and failure. Weakness and failure make us very uncomfortable. I would argue that the Spirit of this World works hard to teach us, as early as it can, that weakness and failure are to be despised.

Strength and competency are, after all, the currency of the world. They are, we're told, the pathway to success and status—which are where we will find our purpose, security, and fulfillment.

Friedrich Nietzsche accused followers of Jesus of being apologists for the weak. The natural hierarchy of the world is based on strength and vitality, he said, and Christians were simply weaker people trying to find a way to subvert that order so they could have an advantage.

And I get it, because Jesus said some pretty wild stuff—stuff like "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." He also said,

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

trust Him and seek His righteousness. He is modeling the kind of knowledge that is most quintessentially human: the knowledge that comes from relationship.

By adopting a biblical view of knowledge, we can be set free from the fear, confusion, and lies of our cultural heritage. We need not be overly burdened by the need for proof. God does not want us to relate to Him with a proof. He wants so much more. If we adopt this view, will it magically fix our relationship with God? Of course not. We are still broken humans in need of God's mercy. But at the very least, we can be free of the lie and focus on the kind of knowledge that really matters.



Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

That does sound pretty subversive to a hierarchy based on strength, capability, and "might making right." I can see why Nietzsche thought Christians were up to something. But I fear that many corners—swaths, even—of Christendom would not feel so foreign to Nietzsche now.

I'm afraid we have become very practiced, even in Christian circles, at claiming Jesus without following His teaching. We have become very practiced at valuing wealth, prowess, and outward appearance and overlooking our inner sickness of the heart. We have become very practiced at looking down in judgment on people who are poor, weak, unimpressive, or annoying. We have become very practiced at despising our political enemies—at, God help us, thanking Him that we are not like them.

We have become practiced at these things because the Spirit of this World is not barred by the gate of a church, and the pull of evil on our hearts doesn't just stop because we say the name of Jesus.



Our sickness is greater than that. The world's sickness is greater than that.

But the Spirit of this Age is not the only Spirit at work in this world—and the other Spirit is not barred by doors, either. There is no corner of the earth—no nation, tribe, or tongue—into which He cannot break. There is no human heart in which He cannot get to work, letting color bloom over the canvas of landscapes that used to lie barren and hostile, bringing about the fruit of repentance through strokes only the Master Artist can make.

Let's come back to weakness and failure.

I think we often conflate the priorities of the Kingdom and the priorities of the World. We get confused when we try to hold together what the Spirit is working and what the flesh values. It is easy to get the idea that a person undergoing the transformative work of the Creator will begin, in some way, to look more impressive—to achieve more, to amount to something visibly desirable. But nothing in Scripture indicates this is the case.


When the Apostle Paul chose a grouping of words to describe the traits we could expect to find growing in a heart in which the Spirit was at work, he used words that described inner qualities and attitudes and responses toward others: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. It is easy to gloss over these words; it is also easy to mistakenly read into them a picture of a fun and agreeable person who has their act together.

But the truth is that everyone's story is incredibly different, and the transformation of a person into the image of their Savior may not look like anything the world recognizes as success. The road of a person's sanctification may in fact be paved with great weakness and great failure. When Paul begged to be healed of his own physical infirmity, God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in weakness."


This is not a story in which we get to be the heroes—in which we, in our strength, build or strive or achieve our way to creating our ideal life, our platform, our safety, our worth. No, it is not a story in which we are the strong

ones, the capable ones. But it is a story in which we are beloved.

In our weakness, in our failure, even on our darkest days, we are known, loved, and freely offered forgiveness. We rest, utterly dependent but entirely safe, in the hand of our Heavenly Father, who made us on purpose and down from whom comes every good and perfect gift.

Someone once asked Jesus who would be greatest in the coming Kingdom. Jesus called a small child to himself, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." 

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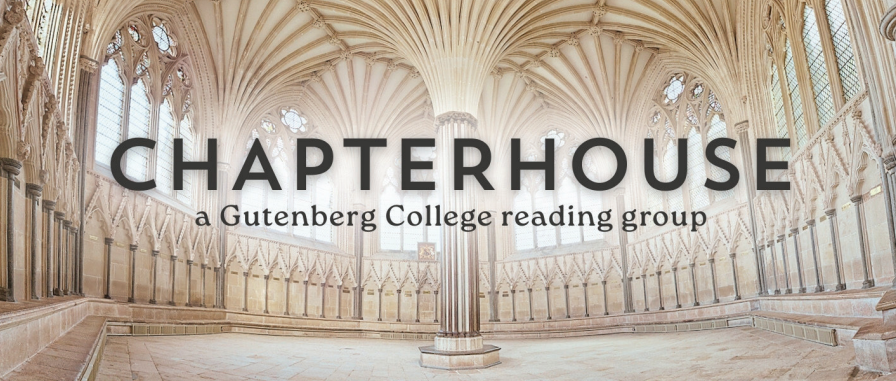
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# On the Brink of Eternity

By Eliot Grasso

This article is edited from a commencement address given to Classical Conversations graduates on May 3, 2025, in Corvallis, Oregon.

Congratulations, seniors, for arriving at this point in your education. You have worked hard, come far, and persevered through complexity and challenges. Your education is worth what you have practiced, and you have practiced some very good things for a very long time.

Of course, one does not arrive at such an occasion without tremendous support from one's community. And the community gathered here is a testament not only to your personal efforts but also to the efforts of the village that has worked to help you arrive at this day. Congratulations to you, village, for your love, understanding, encouragement, and support these past years. You have given a great gift to these graduates, one for which I am sure they will be forever grateful.

As you well know, Classical education is not like other forms of education. It is not designed to conform you to the world and its values. Rather, it is designed to give you the tools you need to be in the world but not of the world—tools needed to navigate your faith, relationships, and vocations with integrity.

Each of you stands not on the brink of the afternoon, the weekend, or the summer. Each of you stands on the brink of eternity.<sup>1</sup> And it is your personal response to eternity that will determine how you will live your life.

In his journals, Denmark's national poet Søren Kierkegaard wrote that "though life be lived forwards, it must be understood backwards"<sup>2</sup>—a sober acknowledgment that we must live in light of eternity, understanding that we are ultimately accountable to the God of

creation. This realization must pervade, condition, and calibrate your analysis of reality and how to navigate it.

Classical education is designed to teach you about how to live a good life—the kind of life that is pleasing to God. And a life that is pleasing to God is the sort of life in which a person aims to practice how to give and receive love well. In his famous send-off speech to his son Laertes, Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* lists recommendations about how Laertes should live his life, ending with this:

*This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.  
Farewell: my blessing season this in thee!*<sup>3</sup>

What does "to thine own self be true" mean?

To be a "self" is to recognize that your decisions are laden with moral weight—that because we are creatures who make moral distinctions, we are therefore accountable for those decisions. To be a self is to acknowledge in Whose image we are made.

When the author of Genesis quotes in 1:26 God's intention to make man in His *image* and *likeness*, he uses the Hebrew words *tselem* (image) and *dmuth* (likeness). Used here, *tselem* (image) implies both a resemblance and a representation—the way a shadow or silhouette resembles a living being in its outline and movements. *Dmuth* (likeness) implies something concrete and physical, like a sculpture of Caesar resembles Caesar the man. In both cases, neither "image" nor "likeness" truly expresses the fullness of the original. Something is lacking. And

like a shadow or a sculpture, we, as creatures, need to be completed, fulfilled, and made whole to become what God intends us to be.

In *The Discarded Image*, C. S. Lewis observes that when moderns look into the night sky, they observe only a dark, cold, lifeless expanse. However, when the ancients gazed upon the heavens, they saw a canvas dotted with light and filled with the music of the spheres. To them, the perfect, circular, harmonious movements of the heavenly bodies represented wholeness and completion that moved in response to God's love for them. To them, the heavens sang ever of wholeness, completion, and perfection. No good thing was lacking, and everything was animated by God's love. And so Lewis encourages us to conceive ourselves "looking up at a world lighted, warmed and resonant with music."<sup>4</sup>

The heavens served as a daily reminder of God's ultimate plan for a human life: that each of us become whole, complete, and perfectly conformed to what true goodness is. And pursuit of the truth—following the Christ—is our given path toward this end. Life is a process in which our image and likeness are to be filled in, made complete, and, most importantly, made truly *alive* through God's good work on our souls for His greater glory and our own.<sup>5</sup> This process of being made whole—that is, the life of faith—is a challenging one marked with struggle, doubts, uncertainties, and tension. To wend our way into the fullness of what it means to be a human being will take an existential commitment of epic proportions. And "being true to yourself" will require that you delineate that which is within your control and that which is not.<sup>6</sup>

The following are *outside* of your control: what other people think, say, and do, including how they feel and react to you and whether they view you charitably or unforgivingly; how God made you and is working in you and others; God's timeline for you and the length of your life and the lives of others; your reputation, legacy, "reach," and impact of your work; and who is given to you to love.

The following are *within* your control: how you observe what is in front of you, including your own emotions and inner reactions; how you talk to yourself and



whether you view others charitably or unforgivingly; what you choose to say and do; whether you turn to God, trust Him, and welcome His work in you; what you pray and hope for; how you respond to what God asks of you and to difficulty, suffering, and distress; and whether you apologize and repent and forgive.

True education is not the sort of thing that makes life easier—far from it. Since education properly done gives one clarity about the task at hand and how to do it well, a true education, in making life good, also makes life hard in the sense that a love for the truth will lift the veil on our own flaws and the fallenness of our world. Yet, in addition to clarity, true education can build a storehouse of wisdom that can help us navigate ourselves, our culture, and our relationship with God with love, patience, grace, kindness, charity, and peace.

Once you step out of these doors, you will find yourselves in a world that offers up all sorts of ideas and makes all sorts of demands. You will have to use your own critical apparatus to decide how to respond. You will have to decide whether you will be *true to yourself*—whether you will practice in a way that will move you toward goodness, toward truth, and toward your Creator God.

You stand today not on the brink of the next five years, but on the brink of eternity. And the good news is that the God who made you stands with you on that brink at every moment, working all things for your good, spurring your soul to lean into His goodness and truth, urging you to practice well, to run the good race and die empty, having poured out into the world and into others all the good things that He has poured into you from the beginning.<sup>7</sup> In this emptying of self, you will be made whole in Christ.

Trust the Lord. Doubt the world. Resist the urge to oversimplify. Resist the urge to go on autopilot. Seek to love your neighbor and your enemy the way that God loves you. Pursue always the ultimate good of whomever you find in the room with you. Forgive and ask for forgiveness. Humble yourself. Be curious about everything. Admit when you do not know. Lean not on your own understanding. Ask for wisdom, and God will give it abundantly. And most of all, be present with God in your process.

I will close with a prayer Kierkegaard wrote to his God almost two centuries ago:

*O great all-knowing, almighty, all-caring God, consider that I do not smirk or smile or consort with the learned scientist when he ridicules the thought that something can be made out of nothing. You did, indeed, in the very beginning take on a universe that was “without form and void,” and in the darkness You said, “Let there be light,” and there was light! Then every nook and cranny of this vast and formless nothing responded to the touch of Your miracle-working Hand. I had better believe that You can create something out of nothing, otherwise there is no hope for me. But miracle of miracles! Even before my life manifests anything of difference or change, I can feel the mighty thrust of Your Holy Spirit working within. You have given me “power to become,” and that power is already at work, promising that I one day will be a full-grown child of Thine after the likeness and the fullness of Christ! Amen.<sup>8</sup>*

Congratulations, Class of 2025! 

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This sentiment—though reframed here in the positive—is drawn from Jonathan Edwards’s 1741 sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals* JJ:167 (1843), Søren Kierkegaard’s Skrifter, Søren Kierkegaard Research Center, Copenhagen, 1997, volume 18, page 306.

<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.3.60-87.

<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, p.111-112 (Cambridge University Press, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> This sentiment is an echo of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (2:4-7).

<sup>6</sup> The “outside my control/within my control” lists that follow are adapted from lists written by Erin Greco.

<sup>7</sup> This sentiment is an echo of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians (2:14-18).

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren and George K. Bowers. *The Mystique of Prayer and Prayer-er*. Lima, OH: CSS Pub., 1994, 95.

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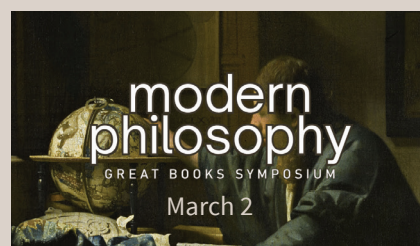
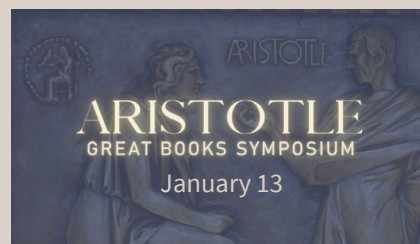
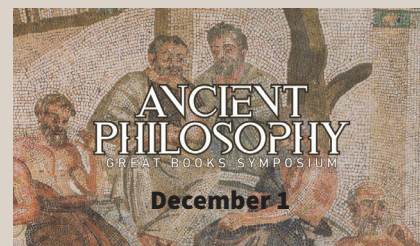
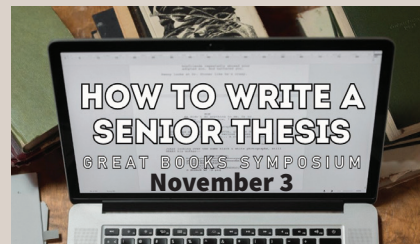
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*featuring Love's Work,  
art by Erin Greco*

Love is the central command of the Bible. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." But what does it mean for imperfect people like us to love both the transcendent God and one another? This winter, we will draw on biblical passages and Kierkegaard's Works of Love to consider how these two loves relate to each other, how they reflect God's love for us, and how they manifest in our own lives. Please join us at Gutenberg's 2026 Winter Institute.

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