

Article

# Being Someplace Else: The Theological Virtues in the Anime of Makoto Shinkai

Matthew John Paul Tan

School of Philosophy & Theology, University of Notre Dame Australia, Sydney 2008, Australia;  
matthew.tan@nd.edu.au

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**Abstract:** This work explores the ways in which the anime of Makoto Shinkai cinematically portrays the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. The article will explore each virtue individually, with specific reference to the work of Josef Pieper and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. In addition, it will juxtapose their explorations of these virtues with samples of Shinkai's corpus of films. It will assert that the consistency of Shinkai's work reveals several important parallels with the theological virtues. Faith is the encounter between one and another that reveals one's nature. Hope is revealed by the distance between one and another, and is realised in traversing that distance to achieve an ecstatic reunion. Love, as the erotic attraction between one and another, is the driver that also sustains the journey and closes the distance. In spite of the similarities, important differences between the cinematic and theological will be highlighted.

**Keywords:** anime; virtue; Pieper; Benedict; distance; faith; hope; love

## 1. Introduction

In this work, I focus on the work of the anime director, Makoto Shinkai, who is part of a wave of anime directors rising to prominence after the mainstream success of Hayao Miyazaki. I chose Shinkai for a number of reasons, the first is that with Miyazaki ostensibly going into retirement, Shinkai is now being billed as one of the front-runners for the directors most likely to fill the void in anime that Miyazaki left behind. The second is that Shinkai's corpus has *prima facie* a consistent thematic content and this consistency makes him an ideal case study. The third and most important reason is that Shinkai's thematic content provides more valuable raw material on a consistent basis for a specifically theological reflection than other anime directors. It must be said that this is not a simple affirmation of everything Shinkai says as theological. Rather, I submit that at some crucial points explored below, Shinkai's work presents valuable points of critical engagement between Christian theology and the world of anime. These focal points of reflection can become moments of dialogue, to which I believe Christian theology can make a crucial contribution. To this end, I will outline a number of thematic items that run through Shinkai's films and juxtapose these with an exploration of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, as explored by Josef Pieper and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.

I argue that Pieper and Benedict XVI provide a refreshing, dramatic portrayal of the theological virtues which have a videographical portrayal in Shinkai's movies. At the heart of this drama is the tie that exists between the ennobling of our natures that comes with the pursuit of virtue, and the constant thematic in the majority of Shinkai's films, wherein an encounter with one person instills in another a longing for distant places. My framing here hints at how this is present in both the works of Pieper and Benedict's coverage of the theological virtues and in Shinkai's films. In doing so, I intend for this article to be an example of performative engagement with one artifact of pop culture, which can be undertaken in other non-written formats as acts of moral formation, especially in the virtues.

## 2. Biography of Makoto Shinkai

Before becoming a film animator, Shinkai worked in advertising and gaming. When he did move into movies, he became noted for his penchant for shorter films. One example that shot Shinkai to fame was a five-minute video called *She and Her Cat* (Shinkai 2000), in which a cat infatuatedly contemplates the exterior and interior life of his female owner. Another coup for Shinkai came in *Voices from a Distant Star* (Shinkai 2002), which runs for 25 min and has achieved cult status in anime circles. He has produced at least three feature length films, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* (or literally translated from the original Japanese, *Above the Clouds, The Promised Place*) (Shinkai and Suzuki 2004), *Children Who Chase Lost Voices* (Shinkai 2011), and most recently *Your Name* (Shinkai 2016). At the time of writing, his latest movie, *Weathering with You*, has not yet been released. Shinkai's main body of work, however, continues to be short or medium length movies running from between 20 min to an hour, the most notable examples of which include *5 Centimetres per Second* (Shinkai 2007) and *The Garden of Words* (Shinkai 2013).

## 3. Someplace Else

While Shinkai has been touted as the next Miyazaki, it is important to note that there are a number of distinct differences in thematic content between the former and latter. Miyazaki's anime, for instance, is very much driven by characters, which means a lot of attention is put into figures within a story. This can relate to their appearance, which are often fantastical, or to the unfolding of the complexities of their inner character. In doing so, Miyazaki brings worlds very different from ours into view. By contrast, at least artistically, Shinkai's characters seem to be a secondary consideration, a way-point for reflection upon things that transcend the character. More specifically, the character seems to be a jumping point to other worlds that are, at least in the biographies of these characters, yet to come into view. In *Voices*, for instance, a boy named Noburu has an encounter with a girl named Mikako. However, this encounter is brief and only acts as the boy's point of reference to a distant galaxy through which Mikako must traverse as part of an expeditionary force (Shinkai 2002). A similar dynamic is played out in *A Place Promised*, where three children spend a large part of the film separated from each other, whilst their time together acts only as the launchpoint for plans for an expedition to a mysterious tower reaching the sky, located in Soviet-occupied Hokkaido (Shinkai and Suzuki 2004). In *Your Name*, the distance is less spatial than temporal, as the encounter is set between a young man and woman living in the same town at two different times, but come to relate to one another by switching bodies in the other's timeline (Shinkai 2016). More suggestive is *The Garden of Words*, which portrays a series of meetings between a student and a teacher in a Japanese garden (Shinkai 2013). As it was with *She and Her Cat*, the encounters between student and teacher lead the student to reflect on the world of the teacher, and the former's unsuccessful attempt to break into the latter's inner life. In this sense, distance is marked by inaccessibility to one's interiority. Visually, an often-used technique that Shinkai uses to accentuate the distance between worlds involves an initial glance at characters, which then pulls back and sometimes down so that our focus is shifted from the character in the foreground to the landscapes and skylines that form the backdrop.

Sometimes, the characters themselves, such as the eponymous narrator in *She and Her Cat*, alert us to these environs by speaking of the earth, snow and sky (Shinkai 2000). All of these backdrops are veritable works of art unto themselves, vivid and drawn with sometimes overwhelming detail. These backdrops often dazzle the viewer, leaving the characters almost melting out of sight. Very often, these backdrops will point beyond themselves to other worlds or galaxies. Within this thematic, one detects a tendency in Shinkai's work to have visible gateways to invisible worlds, be they persons, things or places. Though distant and invisible, these worlds nonetheless have a pull on the desires of the protagonists. What is more, a central plot-driver in Shinkai's films is the desire to bridge the distance between where the characters are and the place they long to be. In *A Place Promised*, the desire to go to the Hokkaido tower is driven by the desire to wake a loved one from a coma, whose brainwaves are said to be interacting with the frequencies of the tower (Shinkai and Suzuki 2004). In *Children who*

*Chase Lost Voices*, this desire is driven by a girl's wish to restore the life of a strange boy he meets who is from a hidden underground world named Agartha (Shinkai 2011).

As Shinkai draws our attention to these distant places, he constantly makes use of romantic love between characters in order to keep alive this link between the distant worlds and the more immediate contexts of those characters. The possibility of new worlds opened up by the encounters between the characters is solidified for the viewer in terms of the possibility of a world with two of the main characters being romantically involved. What is interesting about Shinkai's apprehension of romantic love in most of his films is that the love between characters is often left unfulfilled, or is at best, yet to be fulfilled. In *5 Centimetres*, the distance ends up making Akari bury his love for a girl he met in highschool (Shinkai 2007). In *Voices*, we are left wondering if Mikako, a female robofighter pilot, who expresses her yearnings throughout the film for a high school sweetheart left on earth, will even survive a final battle (Shinkai 2002). In *Your Name*, the two protagonists not only come to develop romantic feelings for each other, but finally have the chance to express them in the same timeline. Somewhat poignantly, the final moment of the movie has our protagonists only asking for each other's name since in the same timeline, they only have an echo of a memory of their encounters in separate timelines (Shinkai 2016). Unresolved human love may sound like an overplayed cliché, until you stop to consider Shinkai's aforementioned technique of using characters as the launch point for considering distant lands. For Shinkai's characters, the romantic yearnings of one for another is linked with the longing to be someplace other than here. The fact that these yearnings are yet to be satisfied comes to accentuate the distance between that other world and ours.

As the geographical space increases between the character's context and the longed-for place, what also opens up is the space to consider and share in the inner lives of Shinkai's characters. The yearnings of one character for another, and their frustration at the distance between them, becomes our yearning or frustration. Viewers are made to feel the distance between characters and by extension, they are also made to long with those characters for the distant places. In the more mundane expressions of this distance between protagonists, such as the distance between two lovers growing up apart, we are made to revisit our own longings to bridge our own distances between places in our own lives.

We might have reason to pause and ask what this has to do with virtue, theological or otherwise. It is here that we turn to the works of Josef Pieper and Benedict. In doing so, I hope to weave together both the theological material as well as archetypal moments in Shinkai's films. In *Faith, Hope, Love*, Pieper writes about the necessary ingredients for belief, and interestingly he alerts the reader to one important point. The crucial moment of our belief is not our knowledge of a set of claims. According to Pieper, what sets the stage for our belief is our encounter with a person of great fidelity. Our faith then is grounded, not so much in the content of the belief, but in the encounter of that person and his or her witness (Pieper 1997, pp. 35–42). However, the person I encounter is more than just flesh and cloth. It is even more than just personality and emotion. Cornelius Castoriadis noted that we move not only as individuals but also as "walking and talking fragments of a given society [ . . . ] embody[ing] . . . ] the essential core of the institutions and significations of their society" (Castoriadis 1997, p. 332). In other words, my encounter with another person opens up the world that lies beyond the confines of the one in which I live.

For Pieper, faith as an encounter germinates not into an assent into a schema of imperatives, but into a desire to be in that other place that we have not yet seen (Pieper 1997, pp. 43–49). The difficulty here is that the place is not seen. What is seen is the person that alerted me to that place, the gateway to that place and thus the anchor between that place and reality. A restlessness then stirs within us, and from that we have the desire for the destination converging with the desire for the person I encounter. The convergence of the desire for the place and the desire for the person is not new, for we find glimmers of that in the Christian tradition. In his sermons, Augustine similarly spoke of our desire for a place merging with a desire for a person, calling "Christ as God is the home country we are going to, and Christ as Man is the way we are going by" (Augustine 1992, p. 244). We see this convergence of person and place in many of Shinkai's films. For example, in *Children who Chase Lost*

*Voices*, Asuna's encounter with Shun is what crystallizes her desire to go to the underground world of Agartha (Shinkai 2011). In *A Place Promised*, a promise between high school sweethearts is what solidifies the desire to go to the mysterious and distant tower in Hokkaido (Shinkai and Suzuki 2004).

#### 4. Hope

Augustine's point about Christ being the way sets us up to consider another, disconcerting, parallel in Shinkai's films: the desire of one person for another is not fulfilled. The personal encounter is not the culmination but the first step towards a deeper communion. However, what this creates is a distance between the lover and the beloved. This distance in turn generates in the characters a longing not only for the other, expressed in the desire to longing to close the distance between them. So long as this desire remains unfulfilled and the distance unbridged, the characters speak about a restlessness, incompleteness and desolation. So long as the distance remains, they are not themselves. This is not mere lovesickness, for the distance between the far-off person and place has opened up a wound that shall remain open until that distance is traversed. We find vivid expressions of this desolation in Shinkai's films. Akari, the male lead in *5 Centimetres*, separated from a girl he loved since high school, gives voice to this towards the end of the film

In just living my life, it's as though sadness piles up all around me. It's in my bed, dried in the sun; the toothbrush in my bathroom; in the memory of my cell phone . . .

And in another part

For the past few years, I've wanted to move on—to grasp onto something beyond my reach. What that is, I don't even know. All I've been able to do is go on working, not knowing where these obsessive thoughts come from. Then one day, I realized my heart was withering... and in it there was nothing but pain.

And one morning, I realized that my beliefs, that I once held so passionately, had completely disappeared . . . (Shinkai 2007)

Akari's interior desolation is put on visual display in *The Place Promised* where Hiroki is grieving after Sayuri, the object of his affections, disappears for three years without explanation. The cure for his grief comes by his attempt to restore his communion with a now comatose Sayuri by embarking on an air journey, rescuing and taking her to the tower in Hokkaido in the hopes that doing so would revive her (Sayuri is kept comatose by her country's military because her dreams are being used as a weapon to counteract a rival country's weaponized tower, which attacks by creating other worlds in the immediate vicinity around it and erasing the current world) (Shinkai and Suzuki 2004).

If faith is not assent to prescriptions, but a personal encounter which unveils a world, then what that encounter also does is open up not a full knowledge of things, but a journey in which things are yet to be known. We find this in paragraphs 8 and 9 of the encyclical on the theological virtue of faith, *Lumen Fidei*, which though released under Francis' papacy, bears many hallmarks of Benedict XVI's thought. Paragraph 8 begins with the assertion that "faith opens a way before us and accompanies our steps through time. Hence if we want to understand what faith is, we need to follow the route it has taken" (Francis 2013). *Lumen Fidei* takes Abraham as the exemplar. Abraham, having encountered a personal God, comes to know of his true nature as a father of many descendants. However, Abraham does not know with certainty the nature of this proposition, but must grow in realization by journeying with the God he encounters, and "enter[ing] into the horizons opened up by God's word" (Francis 2013, para. 9). Abraham's true nature, therefore, becomes known only after he closed the distance between himself and those horizons. Shinkai puts this on brief display in a line in *Voices*, where Noburu spoke of how his nature becomes ennobled merely by being with Mikako. "She was strong," he said, "and I was strong when I was with her". The only trouble is, he is not with her, but literally galaxies away from her, which exposes the gap of vulnerability in Noboru (Shinkai 2002).

We find echoes of this need to close the distance in Josef Pieper's thought, for he draws a very similar link between traversing a distance and what he calls "the innermost structure of created nature"

(Pieper 1997, p. 93). Pieper writes that the designation of places in the itinerary of our lives are necessary analogues to keep in mind because our finite, embodied natures are marked with what he terms the *status viatoris*, or the status of “being on the way” (Pieper 1997, p. 91), towards the fulfillment of our natures. This fulfillment can only happen at a destination called “the Beatific Vision”, the destination that Augustine designated as none other than Christ himself.

Our encounter with God, the stuff of faith, is undertaken whilst living lives in bodies and in finite space. Our historical existence means that we are thrust on the path towards the culmination of that encounter in that destination called Christ. In being thrust to traverse this distance, Pieper tells us, “in the ‘not yet’ of man’s being on the way, the whole span of creatures’ ‘becoming-ness’ is revealed” (Pieper 1997, p. 96). We are not the self-sufficient beings we fancy ourselves to be, for in the very structure of our being we are like Hiroki in *A Place Promised*, like Mikako in *Voices* and like Takaki in *5 Centimeters*. By this I mean that we are not yet ourselves until we are reunited with the one in the initial encounter who revealed the place of fulfillment, and also the distance between that place and where we are now.

In defining the *status viatoris*, Pieper tells us that we are not meant to stay in this transitory state. Faith as an encounter with a person that reveals a world to us, and the concomitant longing for that world and person, will come to fruition in another ecstatic encounter. Moreover, for those who are continuously longing, those who are in the words of Pieper, “reach[ing] ‘with restless heart’, with confidence and patient expectation, towards the arduous ‘not yet’ of fulfillment” (Pieper 1997, p. 100), the expectation that the longing will be satisfied is constitutive of the virtue of hope. If there is one theme that is displayed most prominently in all of Shinkai’s films, it is the notion of hope, whether that hope is the hope to reach a distant tower, or the hope of being reunited with the object of one’s affections. It is theologically significant that hope be on such prominent display, as Pieper writes, is because it is “in the virtue of hope more than any other, man understands and affirms that he is a creature, that he has been created by God” (Pieper 1997, p. 98). In other words, the surest affirmation that we are created by another and for another comes when we realize our finite embodied existence and, in spite of that finitude, still hope that our seemingly infinite longings can be fulfilled.

However, in spite of the prominence of the virtue of hope in Shinkai, it is precisely at this juncture where the thesis of Shinkai’s portrayal of theological virtues starts to become shaky. There certainly are glimmers of this expectant longing turning into a second ecstatic encounter. We find these longings in the final lines of *5 Centimetres*, more consistently in *Voices*, and more fervently in Hiroki in *A Place Promised*. In some cases, the second encounter or the arrival at the longed-for place is even fulfilled. Hiroki does make it to the tower he longed to go to as a child. In *5 Centimetres*, Akari does have a second and even a possible third encounter with Takaki. However, these arrivals are not portrayed as having resolved that restlessness or desolation. It certainly is not the case with Akari. The closest is probably Hiroki upon waking the comatose Sayuri, as *A Place Promised* ends with Sayuri’s awakening and expressing her feelings for Hiroki. Be that as it may, Shinkai is reluctant to explore the fruits of this reunion. We can probably attribute this to another one of Shinkai’s cinematic techniques of apophatically leaving many details to the viewer’s imagination.<sup>1</sup> Why this might fall short of a neat parallel to Pieper’s theological virtues, however, is that Pieper portrays the second ecstatic encounter with the end of our “being on the way”, the end of the *status viatoris*, which he portrays not merely as an arrival, but as full comprehension, particularly of the person’s nature and the purpose of his being a viator.<sup>2</sup> This is why Pieper labels those who are no longer “on the way” as having a *status comprehensoris*. Pieper’s full revelation is not paralleled in any of Shinkai’s protagonists.

<sup>1</sup> Shinkai could probably find some sympathy from paragraph 13 of *Spe Salvi*, which speaks of the ecstasy of the final encounter with God as “something that can only be known negatively, via unknowing”. However, Shinkai’s apophaticism does not extend to an articulated rejection of things that are not (see Benedict 2007, p. 13).

<sup>2</sup> In Pieper’s words, “the meaning of the *status viatoris* is the *status comprehensoris*” (Pieper 1997, p. 94).

Another reason why Shinkai's exploration of hope might fall short of a theological virtue as laid out in Pieper's account is that Shinkai portrays hope as something that emits from and is sustained by the person doing the hoping. What is more, it is a wavering hope which can, and often does, wither. By contrast, Pieper makes it quite explicit that "it is not certain that man, of himself, will be able to 'persevere in hope'" (Pieper 1997, p. 108). Instead, hope is sustained by the object of one's hope, namely the person in the encounter of faith. Pieper cites Paschasius Radbertus, who talks about hope as a holding of Christ's hand. "Christ is held by the hand of hope" he begins, but he goes further by saying that "We hold him and are held. But it is a greater good that we are held by Christ than we hold him. For we can hold him only so long as we are held by him" (Pieper 1997, p. 105). It is this being held by someone other than oneself that fixes one's hope. The only possible exception to this is in *Voices*, where Mikako, piloting a fighter robot in another galaxy, expresses her yearning for the object of her affections, Noburu. As Mikako fights in more distant galaxies, messages from one take longer to reach the other, one taking a year, and then another taking almost nine years (Shinkai 2002). There is a possible hint of this movie fitting into Radbertus' notion of "we hold him and we are held" where Mikako ends one of her emails with the phrase "Noburu, about me, I wonder if you will forget". But again, just how Noburu responds to the idea that he is the linchpin of Mikako's hope is not clear.

## 5. Love

What is much clearer is Shinkai's matrix, which links to reaching the hoped-for person, reaching the hoped for place the encounter with the person has opened up (which is constitutive of faith), and the love between that person and another. In Shinkai's films, it is one's love for another that turns that first encounter with a person into an opening up of a distant world. Through that love, characters come to realize the truth about their nature. They realise that self-discovery comes from another and not from the smug confines of one's own imagination. Finally, it is love that drives and sustains a character, allowing them to endure the difficulty of closing the distance to reach that second ecstatic encounter. Where this distance is never closed, as we saw in *5 Centimetres*, we see the withering of this love and the self.

It is true that expressions of this love are of the romantic variety, and we may be quick to dismiss this as the mere love of attraction, or mere eros. Pieper reminds us, however, that the love of attraction is necessary for any more mature love to even begin. In being attracted, one is providing the material substrate for the theological virtue of love, which is the affirmation of the attractive thing as good in itself. We are not merely referring to having good qualities. For Pieper, to even be attracted to the object of one's desire is to declare to the object: "It is good that you are, how wonderful that you exist" (Pieper 1997, p. 177). Even as romantic love is explored in Shinkai's films, there is no real reason why the love is stirred. Nonetheless, in all his films, we have as a constant theme: the mere existence of one character makes him or her an object of erotic attraction by another. Benedict reminds us in *Deus Caritas Est* that love of this sort provides that faintest glimmer of a divine moment, where the creature participates in the moment where God saw something He brought into existence and declared it very good (Benedict 2005, p. 9). The creature participates in this divine exclamation not in an explicit declaration of its goodness, but in the erotic pull which is generated by the mere existence of the attractive thing. The attraction of eros draws the one so attracted out of itself, in order for that self to "be there for the other" (Benedict 2005, p. 7; Pieper 1997, pp. 170–72).

This link between the attraction of eros and the self-giving love of agape is given more weight when one considers what Pieper counts as affirming the good of the attractive thing in eros. For Pieper, affirmation comes in the desire to identify oneself with the good of the object of attraction by traversing the gap between oneself, the center of erotic attraction, and the object (Pieper 1997, pp. 238–42). This traversing of the distance is given greater consideration in *Deus Caritas Est*. Benedict suggests that eros is what stirs the drive to traverse the distance, but in that movement towards that object, something happens to eros. Benedict says that "in drawing near to the other", the one attracted becomes "less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and

more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to “be there for” the other. The element of agape thus enters into this love” (Benedict 2005, p. 7). What Benedict means is that agape cannot leave eros behind. Rather, it is precisely in the attraction of eros that agape enters, and is purified as agape deepens beyond its entrance. It is in the closing of the distance between one and another, between one place and another, that the instinct of eros is purified into agape.

The link between the traversing of distance and the purification of eros into agape can be seen in the final phase of *A Place Promised*, where Hiroki’s journey to awake Sayuri at the tower in Hokkaido, puts the life of the former at great risk (Shinkai and Suzuki 2004). However, it is a risk that Hiroki willingly takes upon himself in order to save Sayuri. In the culmination of *Your Name*, we also see the transformation of eros into the self-forgetting love of agape put on very dramatic display. Thanks to a ritual at a shrine, our protagonists who usually live in different timelines finally meet in person, though still occupying each other’s bodies. In the time they have together, Taki, the male protagonist in this story, acts on his erotic attraction, not by pursuing Mitsuha in the common space they have. Rather, the former sacrifices his opportunity by warning the latter of an impending comet strike to her town in her timeline, thereby saving both her and her townspeople. To avoid the forgetting that comes with returning to one’s body, each attempts to write one’s name on the hand of another. Mitsuha is unsuccessful and Taki only goes as far as declaring in writing his love for Mitsuha, though without writing his name. This act of self-forgetting eros poignantly plays out in the saving of one by another, which is also coupled with the forgetting of one by the other.

## 6. Conclusions

In this work, I have argued that Shinkai’s thematic content could be a reliable source of material for exploring the subjective experiential dimension of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. I have argued that the raw material for considering these themes is found in the consistency of a pattern in Shinkai’s filmography, which include the encounter and distance between others, the desire to traverse the space from one to another, and being driven to traverse that distance through the attraction of one for another. Each of these are helpful artistic reference points to embody, respectively, faith as the encounter with the other, hope as the becoming that comes with closing the distance from one to another, and love as the attraction to another which reaches a climax in the self-forgetting for the sake of another.

I suggest that, in drawing attention to this relationship between theology and one set of artifacts of anime, we can be more attentive to the theological content that is being smuggled through the products of not just anime, but pop culture more generally. One does not mean here a mere passive acceptance of all content as being consistent with Christian theology. In fact I am arguing that with a greater awareness of Christian theology, one can get into a more nuanced engagement with pop culture. I mentioned at the beginning that the above study can serve as a piece of performative engagement in a written form, and I suggest that other, perhaps even more effective, non-written means of theologically inflected performative interpretation can be carried out in the service of moral formation, where the point of initial contact is a cultural yearning for that which transcends the immediately present. Paul once wrote to the Romans that “all of creation is groaning towards the final revelation”,<sup>3</sup> and one ought to be attentive to such groanings in pop culture, even in something as insignificant as a five-minute animated clip about a cat. The Christian sympathizes with such groanings and might even groan in solidarity. Nonetheless, the Christian also remains tireless in pointing towards Jesus Christ as the point at which all restless groanings cease.

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<sup>3</sup> Rom 8:22.

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