

FROM THE RELATIVE TO THE ABSOLUTE:
LOUIS DE RAEYMAEKER'S "METAPHYSICAL PROOF"
FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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I

In a recent article, Professor John F.X. Knasas mourns the passing of neo-Thomism in contemporary Catholic intellectual circles.¹ According to Knasas, late 20th century Thomism was a battleground between two competing schools of thought. Until the Second Vatican Council, neo-Thomism flourished. Represented chiefly in the writings of Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, the neo-Thomist position featured a characteristically *a posteriori* approach to knowledge: beginning with the apprehension of actual beings given in sensation, neo-Thomists sought to articulate a sound metaphysics with the help of transcendental concepts "that span the breadth of the real, from creature to creator."² All such neo-Thomists accepted the same epistemological presuppositions, though they generally fall into two camps: "existential" neo-Thomists who define *esse* in terms of "existential act"; and "Aristotelian" neo-Thomists who tend to define "being" as "formal act." After Vatican II, a new brand of Thomism emerged, dominating the schools and winning particular favor among Catholic theologians. Following the groundbreaking work of the Belgian Jesuit, Joseph Marechal, Transcendental Thomism rejected the *a posteriori* approach of neo-Thomism, opting instead for an *a priori* understanding of human knowledge. Transcendental Thomists maintain that "human knowing" is ultimately the "knower's own intellectual dynamism to Infinite Being," a dynamism which is "innate, or inborn to the intellect."³ Though it might be argued that

¹ John F. X. Knasas, "Whither the Neo-Thomist Revival?," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* Vol. 3 (Fall 2000), 121-49.

² *Ibid.*, 127

³ *Ibid.*, 129

Transcendental Thomism has its origin in the classical works of Augustine and Bonaventure, Knasas believes that the movement is largely a critical response to the Kantian philosophical perspective in late modernity.

Transcendental Thomism has proven remarkably successful in replacing neo-Thomism in Catholic universities, though Knasas sees its victory as a philosophical—and epistemological—“disaster,” because it opens the door to skepticism and relativism.⁴ One does not have to agree in every detail with his critique in order to recognize the need for a reconsideration of neo-Thomism. In light of this, it is all the more disappointing that, when listing the exponents of neo-Thomism, Knasas neglects to mention the contributions of a great 20th century philosopher whose Thomist credentials were almost as impressive as Gilson’s or Maritain’s. Associated for many years with the Higher Institute of Philosophy at Louvain, Fr. Louis De Raeymaeker played a significant part in the recovery of Thomistic philosophy. In his seminal work, *The Philosophy of Being: A Synthesis of Metaphysics*, he constructed a profound defense of “existential” neo-Thomism, while responding to the unique intellectual challenges of modernity. If Knasas is correct, and there is a need for a “neo-Thomist revival,” perhaps it would be useful—especially in light of the current debate about the status of Thomistic metaphysics—to reconsider De Raeymaeker’s work. Towards this end, I would like to examine his argument for the existence of God. While impressed with the Five Ways, De Raeymaeker also developed within his writings a “metaphysical proof” that draws upon some of the central themes in Thomistic metaphysics. In the following remarks, I will first explore the argument, setting it within the context of his overall treatment of the question of being, then briefly show how the proof supplies an unparalleled approach to God, and finally identify its sources in the writings of St. Thomas.

II

The “metaphysical proof” is principally devoted toward solving the problem of being. Hence, before proceeding to the argument proper, I would like to examine De Raeymaeker’s treatment of this question. Since his analysis presumes some acquaintance with Thomistic

⁴ Ibid., 136

metaphysics, I shall also touch upon his account of the structure of finite being.

According to De Raeymaeker, the metaphysical question is a variation on the classical problem of the one and the many. This problem comes into view after a direct encounter with being, for "being never reveals itself without a question mark."⁵ The "point of departure" for this encounter is found in a sustained reflection upon the movement of "consciousness" in experience.⁶ In its first moment, consciousness is an "experience of self," a "coming into contact" with the "living ego." Such awareness is always a recognition of the self as "being," and it involves an "ontological perception" that is direct and undeniable.⁷ At the same moment, the ego is also made aware of that which exists outside of it, of a "world" of objects that forms a "non-ego." In this confrontation, it immediately encounters the non-ego as "surrounding it," as placing an "insurmountable limit" upon its activity:

A limit unites just as it separates adjacent regions; it is the place where distinct sectors meet each other. Thus the ego and the non-ego are related one to the other. The limited ego does not exist without its limits, nor does it exist without the non-ego which limits it. It is by its own nature an ego in the world, an ego surrounded by non-egos.⁸

Through further reflection upon its own activity, the ego gradually recognizes its "real and radical distinction" from the non-ego.⁹ In the exercise of its freedom, it comes to know itself as an "autonomous" being; it is not simply a part of the world. This awareness of its liberty,

⁵ Louis De Raeymaeker, *The Philosophy of Being: A Synthesis of Metaphysics*, trans. Edmund H. Ziegelmeier, S. J. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1954), 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32. By beginning his study of metaphysics with an "act of attentive reflection" on the experience of "consciousness," De Raeymaeker reveals his interest in, and mastery of, the early 20th century phenomenological movement.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

however, goes hand in hand with an appreciation of the unavoidable limitations forced upon it by the world. The ego knows that it is neither "responsible" for the world itself nor for its own "origin," which mysteriously "lies outside" of its will.¹⁰ In its confrontation with the non-ego, furthermore, it inevitably discovers other conscious beings who indicate by their external behavior a "personal interior life" similar to its own. It is especially by means of this contact that the ego establishes the "truth that there are many beings."¹¹

This experience is at heart an "affirmation of being" because, in recognizing its opposition to the other, the ego not only affirms its own existence but the existence of the non-ego as well.¹² Now, every affirmation of being reveals the metaphysical problem because every such affirmation uncovers conflicting notes in the data itself. Indeed, two radically "incompatible" properties define the being and activity of every reality—i.e., "the absolute element of its value of being and the relativity of its mode of individual being."¹³ It is important to understand what De Raeymaeker means here. First, in any grasp of the real, one encounters being as an "incontestable fact" that the intellect must affirm and cannot deny upon penalty of contradiction. It is surely an incontrovertible truth, for example, that whenever something exists, and for however long it exists, it is impossible to say that it does not exist. To say that something exists *now*, at this particular point in time, is to affirm a truth that obtains not only for the *now*, but "for all times." The statement has a value that is "unconditional," absolute, that transcends this particular moment in the temporal order. The property of necessity which is discovered in such existential judgments is grounded upon the "unshakeable solidity" of the reality itself. And this same solidity, this "absolutely definitive consistency," characterizes being as a whole: each and every reality, whatever its ontological status, expresses a value of being that is absolute.¹⁴ De Raeymaeker writes:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

Being exists; and by its own peculiar power, its "*virtus essendi*," it excludes radically and without condition or any restriction all that would be opposed to it and that would tend to justify a different affirmation... Being rests upon its own unshakeable and irresistible force...¹⁵

What does it mean to consider being as "absolute"? First and foremost, it means that being cannot be restricted or qualified in any fashion: it neither rests upon "any extrinsic condition" nor possesses any "relation to some term outside" of it, because, outside of being, there is only nothing.¹⁶ As absolute, being is completely independent and occupies a "unique domain" that is "self-sufficient" and self-explanatory. Since it includes everything and is opposed to nothing, being is "the whole of everything" and "penetrates" to the core of every reality with an "absolute validity."¹⁷ Unlimited and unopposed, it enfolds everything in a fundamental unity. Its absolute character is grasped with particular force in our idea of being, which, in its transcendental breadth, forms "the foundation" for "all intellection."¹⁸

But, while being as "absolute" contains everything, it is also shot through with relativity. As we have seen, the ego becomes aware of itself and its limitations only in relation to the non-ego. While

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27.

¹⁸ Ibid., 28 It should be noted that the analogical idea of being, while conveying the character of the absolute, also contains within it the relative or particular modes of being as well. De Raeymaeker suggests that the idea of being differs from universal (specific or generic) abstract concepts inasmuch as it is "not limited to signifying one aspect of the reality" (36). By restricting or qualifying a particular reality through abstraction, a specific or generic concept provides only an imperfect or incomplete account of the being; its univocal precision is a sign of its abstraction from (or separation from) the full richness of the reality. In its transcendental reach, however, the idea of being touches upon "that which is beyond all abstraction," the concrete individual; as such, it resembles a sort of "intuitive apprehension." The knowledge grasped in this idea is also "obscure," but its imperfection is due to its holding or hiding within it "the confusion of the particular modes which it implies" (37).

subsisting in its own right, the ego does not stand alone; there is something “outside of it,” opposed but related to it. There are many beings, “autonomous” subjects which exist in “different times” and at different places, and which possess “different modes and forms.”¹⁹ In order to capture the precise character of being’s relativity, De Raeymaeker introduces the notion of participation: every finite being truly participates in the value of being, but it does so according to its own proper “mode,” in its own individual manner. The doctrine of participation implies two central features about finite being. First, participation means that particular being is not the whole of being, since—by reason of its very individuality—it necessarily refers to the existence of other beings in the same line of perfection. Grounded together in the absolute value, particular beings form a unique *complexus*, a fundamental order, since there is no “source of participation...more profound” than being itself.²⁰ As part of this order, each being must be conceived in terms of its relation to the other parts within the whole and to the whole itself. De Raeymaeker is so impressed with the relative character of particular being that he writes of its being “welded” or “riveted” to the order.²¹

Yet participation also entails the real autonomy of the participant. In emphasizing the fundamental unity of being, De Raeymaeker insists that the bond that holds the finite terms together is one that is characteristic of an “order.” An order is a unity in multiplicity, a “real multiplicity reduced to unity.” The *complexus* of beings is not a mere “arrangement of parts,” but an order of autonomous participants.²² The participant as such takes part in being, has a “share” in being, but this by no means suggests that it “forms a part of being”; it is a completely finished subject, a whole within the whole. Though it is limited, its limitation does not imply any “ontological incompleteness” on its part, but rather that its peculiar mode of being, its individuality, is distinct from the others, and thereby does not embrace the others, let alone

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 287.

²² *Ibid.*, 29.

exhaust the full “perfection of the order.”²³ Consequently, the “relativity” characteristic of the participant in being cannot be equated with the relations found among the multiple parts or finite modes that go to make up an individual subsistent being. De Raeymaeker is clear about this: each particular being is a distinct *suppositum*. While fully contained in the order, it maintains its autonomy; and, in possessing its own proper *esse*, it subsists and “bears witness” to the value of the absolute.

The precise outlines of the problem of being are clear. Participation in being, relativity on the level of the absolute, is a given. But how is this order possible? How can being, an unlimited unity, suffer limitation and multiplicity? For that matter, how can finite being, mired in relativity, nevertheless subsist and express the value of the absolute? To account for the order, De Raeymaeker suggests that an adequate solution must “preserve” both the unity in being and the actual “subsistence of its multiple elements.”²⁴ For this reason, a radical pluralism that sacrifices unity for the sake of subsistence would be as unacceptable as a metaphysical monism that guarantees unity by eliminating the genuine autonomy of finite beings.

This problem requires an exhaustive analysis of the structure of particular being. In line with the Thomistic tradition, De Raeymaeker offers a full treatment of this question.²⁵ He first explores the internal complexity of particular beings in the doctrine of the real composition of essence and existence. The complete account of any being includes a

²³ Ibid., 30.

²⁴ Ibid., 32.

²⁵ Later in his treatment, De Raeymaeker fills out the structure of finite being. To explain participation on the level of specific perfection, he argues for the form-matter composition within the essence of material beings. And, to account for the active becoming characteristic of all finite beings, he introduces the substance-accident composition. Together with essence and existence, these principles are inserted into a comprehensive act/potency schema: each pair of correlatives includes a principle of act that supplies the perfection “uniting” the terms within the order, and a principle of potency that represents the individual mode by which the being participates in, or possesses, the perfection.

“double affirmation”: the being *is*; and the being is *this being*.²⁶ Inasmuch as it subsists, particular being possesses a value that is absolute, which it shares with other beings. Yet inasmuch as it exists in its own proper mode, insofar as it is *this being*, and not some other, it must possess a reason for the individuality that helps distinguish it from other beings in the same line of perfection. Thus, particular being forms a kind of *complexus*, composed as it is of two distinct, but inseparable, principles: the real “principle of being,” the “root of subsistence,” which is responsible for the value of being, and the real principle of the mode of being, which is in turn responsible for the individuality and the limitation found in being.²⁷ Whereas the principle of being provides the ground of autonomy for particular being, the mode of being “completely individualizes” it so that particular being finds itself belonging to, or included within, an order of beings. De Raeymaeker emphasizes that these principles, which are identified in the Thomistic tradition as essence (quiddity or nature) and existence (*esse*), possess the character of “transcendental relations.” Transcendental relations are neither real beings nor parts of being, but ontologically correlative principles that must never be considered apart from “the relation which bind them together.”²⁸ As pure correlatives, each term functions wholly in connection with its corresponding co-principle; the principles of essence and existence thus “communicate” their character to each other so as to constitute the unity and being of finite reality.²⁹ De Raeymaeker’s analysis, while clarifying the ontological status of particular being, also serves to deepen the “mystery of participation.” “Belonging to an order” necessarily implies the presence of complexity within particular being; in other words, external relativity demands an internal relativity, an inner structure of metaphysical co-principles, which constitutes the “ontological reason” for participation. At its core, finite being is nothing but a “cluster of relations,” and its relativity is so com-

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 99

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 332.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

prehensive that even the principle of being, the value of the absolute, emerges as a mere correlative.³⁰

With this background, let us proceed to the formal argument. The study of being shows that particular beings form a *complexus*, an order of beings “absolutely unique.”³¹ In every order, the many are linked so as to form a unity, a whole. Hence, to give an account of any order, one must first identify the “principle of unity” that supplies the ultimate reason for the order. Now, unlike all other orders, the order of beings is “absolute,” fundamental; this means that the members that constitute the whole are contained in it by reason of their “entire reality,” their “*being-in-itself*.”³² In other words, the “*being in itself*” of particular beings cannot be something considered apart from their relation to the order. Rather, it is identical to their inclusion in the order itself.

The doctrine of participation makes this clear. Particular being is a distinct *suppositum* which participates in the value of being in an “individual” and “incommunicable” way.³³ By means of this participation, it subsists, it expresses the value of the absolute; yet, by way of this same participation, it subsists in a wholly individual fashion, it is only one among many possible beings. It thus enters into a profound “synthesis” with every other particular being, and belongs so completely to the *complexus* that it can never be “isolated” or abstracted from it in any manner.³⁴ Moreover, its inclusion in the order is not by means of some “accessory” relation that is added on to what it already possesses; it belongs simply by reason of “what it is,” by reason of its very “*being in itself*.” Particular being is a correlative, and since a relation cannot be understood without reference to its *terminus*, an adequate explanation of particular being must necessarily include an explanation of the full *complexus* of beings.³⁵ To account for the “least

³⁰ Ibid., 336

³¹ Ibid., 282.

³² In the following analysis, I will also quote from a later, condensed version of De Raeymaeker’s proof, “The Metaphysical Problem of Causality,” published in *Philosophy Today* Vol. 1 (1957), 219-30.

³³ De Raeymaeker, *The Philosophy of Being*, 283.

³⁴ Ibid., 283.

³⁵ De Raeymaeker, “The Metaphysical Problem of Causality,” 227.

reality," De Raeymaeker notes, one must furnish an explanation for the whole of reality.

Now, the question is whether particular being by itself can offer such an account. De Raeymaeker immediately spots a problem. As a mere part within the whole, no particular being can possibly furnish an explanation of another particular being. This follows from its "incommunicable individuality." As distinct *supposita*, particular beings are by definition "opposed" to each other in the same line of perfection. Made "distinct by reason of their own limits," they are outside of each other; each possesses what the other lacks.³⁶ As proof of their "mutual exteriority," De Raeymaeker cites the "free actions" of the human person.³⁷ The ego's decisions are irrevocably the responsibility of the ego and the ego alone. Just as one person cannot be held responsible for the decisions of another, so no particular being can hope to account for the existence or activity of another particular being. And, if this is the case, it can hardly supply a reason "for all the realities contained in the order."³⁸ Moreover, since the reason that accounts for the order and the reason that explains particular being is one and the same, in failing to provide an answer for the whole, the particular being cannot sufficiently explain "its own reality." It lacks an "absolute foundation."

Nor would it suffice to point to the "coexistence of finite beings in the universe" as if their mere collective presence in being were enough to account for the order.³⁹ De Raeymaeker insists that an answer cannot be found in the "unlimited ensemble" of finite beings: because they are opposed to each other by reason of their individuality, their very diversity as individuals cannot explain their "unity" in being, for diversity as such cannot produce unity. Besides, this would be like suggesting, he notes, that the principle of the order could be discovered "partially in each particular being," so that, by means of simple addition, one could arrive at a sufficient reason. Yet such an explanation, containing "as many parts as there are beings," would lack

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ De Raeymaeker, *The Philosophy of Being*, 285.

³⁸ De Raeymaeker, "The Metaphysical Problem of Causality," 227.

³⁹ De Raeymaeker, *The Philosophy of Being*, 283.

unity, and thus could not serve as a principle of the whole.⁴⁰ De Raeymaeker's conclusion is inescapable: the sufficient reason for the order, the "adequate explanation" of the whole, cannot be discovered in any particular being, or in any collection of finite beings, or even in the "unlimited ensemble" of finite beings.

At this stage of the argument, two things are abundantly clear: the order of beings needs a foundation, and the reason that provides this foundation must be extrinsic to the order itself. As we have seen, a particular being, by the very act of belonging to an order, is defined by its relativity, its limitation in being. This ontological status necessarily prevents it from providing an adequate explanation for its own existence, or for its place within the order. Now, if the same holds true for each and every particular being, it follows that the reason which ultimately accounts for the order as a whole cannot be a particular or finite being itself. In other words, if it is to function as the unparticipated "source of all participation" in being, this "fundamental cause" must be free from the internal and external relativity that marks particular being in its existence and action. The "unique creative cause," the "absolute basis" of all particular beings, cannot be found within, or exist relative to, the order of being; it must be unlimited or non-finite being, "pure subsistent being," "being without restriction"—"God, the Creator, the Cause, absolutely free."⁴¹

De Raeymaeker suggests that this same conclusion can be reached by way of an analysis of the internal structure of any particular being. As we have seen, particular being forms a kind of *complexus* on its own; it is a "cluster of relations," a structure of correlative principles. Now the unity of this structure, the "harmony" of the correlatives, cannot be accounted for by the particular being alone. Let us take the case of the real composition of essence and existence. The principles of being and the mode of being are "distinct and irreducible" transcendental correlatives. "Transcendental relations" are radically "distinct" from each other and thus irreducibly opposed; as such, they cannot "form a unity" of themselves.⁴² Yet these principles operate exclusively as

⁴⁰ De Raeymaeker, "The Metaphysical Problem of Causality," 228.

⁴¹ De Raeymaeker, *The Philosophy of Being*, 286.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 255.

correlatives; each term cannot be conceived outside of its relation with its distinct co-principle. Since, as correlatives, they necessarily form the structure that constitutes the unity and reality of finite being, but, as distinct principles, they cannot account for this unity, it follows that particular being requires an extrinsic cause, a composer, responsible for its foundation. And if the internal structure of existence and essence provides the “ontological reason” for the particular being’s external relativity, it is not so surprising that particular being fails to explain this “reason,” since it cannot account for the order as a whole.⁴³ From either angle—whether one looks to its internal structure or to its external relations—particular being requires a cause.

It is only with the affirmation of the creative Cause that the problem of being can be solved. As De Raeymaeker has argued, to explain the order of beings, an adequate solution must preserve the fundamental unity found in being while allowing for the actual subsistence of the many. The proof, which is really a reflection upon the meaning of participation, shows why particular being cannot meet these demands. Participation requires both subsistence and relativity, and these two aspects constitute a fundamental tension in being that cannot be resolved on the level of particular being itself. The argument makes this clear. Whereas particular being’s utter relativity dictates that it cannot stand alone in reality, its autonomy prevents it from becoming subsumed into the whole as a finite part. The creative Cause can provide for both of these needs. Because all finite beings participate in the infinite being of God, they all are grounded in the same perfection, express the “same absolute value of being,” and “flow from the same source.”⁴⁴ It is thus not remarkable that they are found welded to the same order. Their radical unity in being, their “unshakeable consistency,” is ultimately due to the Absolute source which binds them together in “its all powerful fecundity.”⁴⁵ The thorough-going relativity that characterizes the members of the order is a consequence of their complete dependence upon the Absolute. And, while their participation in “pure subsistent being” provides for their unity, it also

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 287.

accounts for their autonomy. As De Raeymaeker points out, the “radical subordination” of the finite to the Infinite is nothing other than a dynamic partaking of the “absolute independence of the active and creative God.”⁴⁶ Finite being, a pure “gift of the Absolute,” cannot help but express the value of its unlimited source.

III

I believe De Raeymaeker’s proof is stronger than other, better known, arguments because it avoids certain difficulties traditionally associated with these proofs. First, it concludes directly to a creative Cause that is infinite and unique. The proof concerns the problem of being. Being is absolute, all-inclusive, which means that the order of beings embraces all orders and values. Whether the proof is successful or not, at least it does not have the typical shortcomings of arguments that begin from a more restricted order within being. The history of philosophy testifies to the struggles of theists who have constructed proofs for God’s existence by starting from some limited feature within the material order. I have no wish to discredit cosmological or teleological arguments here; they remain vital and serious contributions to philosophical theology. However, even when these arguments establish the existence of a First Cause, there is still much philosophical work that remains before one is able to reach the infinite, creative source of being.

De Raeymaeker’s proof avoids this problem. The argument cuts to the chase, as it were, and gets “to the bottom of the problem.” In attempting to ground the all-embracing order of being, it leaves nothing out of consideration. Particular beings are dependent on a cause by reason of their very limitation. To account for the entire order of finite beings, the creative Cause must be free of such limitation—it must be unlimited, Infinite Being. Were it restricted in any fashion, were it “infected” with relativity, it would belong to the order and thus could not supply the reason for the order.⁴⁷ Nor is there any need to

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁴⁷ In speaking of the infinite Cause here, we must note that De Raeymaeker understands the “infinite” as the negation of the “finite.” Now, the meaning of the “finite” corresponds to the notion of “belonging to an order,” and the parallel concepts of the “multiple” and the “relative” (69). That which is

introduce additional steps in the argument to establish the unicity of this cause. Because it provides the foundation for the “absolutely unique” order of beings, the creative Cause itself must be absolutely one and unique. This point goes to the heart of the proof: particular beings reveal an absolute solidity in being that their diversity can never

“finite” is said to be limited by, or exist “relative” to, all the other members within the same order. Given this, the “infinite” can be understood in connection with the order as a whole: an order is “infinite” because it is not limited by, or opposed to, anything existing outside itself (at least with respect to the relative perfection of the order); as such, it is “absolute” and “unique.” As an example, we can speak of each physical body within the universe as being limited by other bodies—that is, each body exists relative to the other physical units within the order itself. Yet we must admit that the entire *complexus* or collection of physical bodies which comprises the physical universe as a whole is “infinite,” because, by containing all physical bodies, it is not limited by, or opposed to, any physical body outside of it.

Now the “ensemble of finite beings,” according to De Raeymaeker, appears to be the absolute order which includes all other orders. The question as to whether such an “ensemble” contains an “inexhaustible multitude” of finite elements within it—a problem that uncovers another meaning of the concept of the “infinite”—while philosophically interesting in itself, does not immediately concern us here. The real question for De Raeymaeker is whether this “unlimited order of beings” is the “absolute infinite.” If the order cannot sufficiently account for itself, as he argues, it is in need of a principle or source which is causally responsible for its existence. In considering this possibility, De Raeymaeker points out that such a principle necessarily transcends the order:

...the fundamental principle of unity would not limit this order in the sense attributed up to now to the word ‘limit,’ for it would not constitute a realm adjacent to it. In other words, such a principle could not limit the ensemble of finite beings in the way in which one finite being limits another finite being; otherwise, it would also be a limited being itself, and it would be in its place only in the interior of the order of beings. All this would be tantamount to distinguishing two infinities: first of all, the ensemble of limited beings, whose infinity (while being perfectly unlimited, not bounded by an adjacent domain) is declared relative, since it is related to a real principle distinct from this ensemble; and in the second place, this last principle itself, in no limited and finite sense, whose infinity, without relation to anything, is consequently perfectly absolute (73-74).

explain. This radical unity must have its reason in a source whose uniqueness is unassailable and whose inner unity is the model of “utter simplicity.”

Secondly, the proof is preferable to arguments that attempt to show the impossibility of an infinite regress of finite causes. Within the *complexus* of being, one discovers a series of ordered causes. Each term within the series functions as a caused cause: while really working to produce its effect, it depends in turn on a prior cause for its own operation. Some theists contend that if it can be determined that the series of ordered causes is limited in number and enjoys a first term, then it can be shown that this first term must have its source in a creative Cause wholly distinct from the series itself. On the other hand, if the series is without beginning, or infinite in number, there would be no reason to posit an absolute cause since every term in a beginningless series “would find in a preceding finite cause its explanatory reason.”⁴⁸

De Raeymaeker not only considers such arguments open to serious difficulties, but, given the conclusions of the “metaphysical proof,” quite unnecessary. As he has suggested, finite being, inasmuch as it belongs to an order, is wholly dependent upon the action of a creative Cause. Since a finite cause cannot sufficiently explain its own existence,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 287. According to De Raeymaeker, Thomas is not attempting to establish the impossibility of an infinite series in the First, Second, or Third Way. In a note on the Second Way, he comments (297): “It seems certain to us that St. Thomas does not seek the “first” Cause by passing through a series of causes, of which this cause would be the first term. First of all, he hesitates to declare himself capable of proving that the infinite series is impossible. Then, he defends the view that the creative action of God produces finite beings directly, without the intervention of a subordinate cause (*Summa Theol.*, I, q. 45, a.5), so that the divine causal influx is not transmitted by intermediary causes but it is exerted immediately on every creature.” What, then, is the point of Thomas’ attack on the infinite regress? De Raeymaeker’s position here seems close to the one taken recently by John F. Wippel. Wippel argues that Thomas is not concerned with “refuting the very possibility of a beginningless series of essentially ordered caused causes, but with showing that such a series is meaningless and has no explanatory power unless one also admits that there is an uncaused cause.” *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D. C.: the Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 461.

it cannot offer an “adequate reason” for its “whole effect” or even “for a part of (its) effect.”⁴⁹ Now, all particular beings are in the same boat and possess the same ontological status; they exist relative to an “absolute principle.” And, if the whole series of finite causes is insufficient, it matters little whether that series in question is finite or infinite in number. By multiplying finite causes to infinity, one only ends up with an infinity of insufficiency—or, as De Raeymaeker claims, “zero multiplied as much as you wish, still equals zero.”⁵⁰

Finally, the argument offers a definitive response to metaphysical monism. To be sure, every Thomist will reject a monistic position, but De Raeymaeker seems especially concerned with this problem because of his sensitivity to the radical unity in being. This concern comes across in his high regard for Hegel and German Idealism. In the Hegelian system, finite being is so completely “open” to “the other” that its ontological status is reduced to that of a part or mode within the “one, unique being.”⁵¹ Now, De Raeymaeker considers monism (and pantheism) objectionable not only because it eliminates the real autonomy of finite being, but because, by making the finite a part of the Infinite, it renders our conception of the Absolute incoherent, a “receptacle of contradictions.”⁵² The metaphysical dualism of creature and Creator, which De Raeymaeker’s proof defends, avoids these difficulties by protecting the absolute character of the creative Cause while preserving the actual subsistence of finite being. We have seen how this works. The proof concludes to the total independence of the Absolute. The creative Cause can never be confused with its effects: particular beings might be “absolutely relative,” but God is by no means “relatively absolute.” And, in promoting the profound distinction between creature and Creator, the proof preserves the autonomy of particular being. Since the relative can never be identified with the Absolute, finite being cannot be conceived as a mere part or mode of the Infinite; its relation of radical subordination to the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 186.

Absolute, which its status as creature implies, requires its very real subsistence in being.

IV

What is the textual inspiration for De Raeymaeker's argument? While the movement from the relative to the Absolute has its foundation in the Thomistic metaphysical teaching as a whole, the argument itself is chiefly an exposition, and defense, of the principle that "whatever exists by participation is dependent on a cause." De Raeymaeker's focus on participation certainly helps explain his unqualified support of the Fourth Way, a proof often associated with this doctrine. In his interpretation, the *Quarta Via* bears a striking resemblance to the "metaphysical proof." This argument is crucial to Thomas' position precisely because it is based upon participation, (the) "most fundamental reason of the close union of all finite reality with infinite and absolute Being."⁵³ Whereas all Five Ways focus on some "indication of limitation" within finite being, the Fourth Way goes to the heart of the matter—it begins with "limitation, as such." Considered within the proof as a degree of being, and thereby "limited in all it comprises," particular being exhibits a "deep-seated relativity" that must find its sufficient reason in a "Being...which is not a degree, since being the source, it is complete, perfect."⁵⁴

The trouble is that the *Quarta Via*, and participation arguments in general, have not fared especially well in recent scholarship. We may take as an example the judgment rendered by De Raeymaeker's contemporary at Louvain, Fernand Van Steenberghen. In his study *Hidden God*, Canon Van Steenberghen is nothing if not critical of the *Quarta Via*.⁵⁵ All of the arguments present difficulties: they are either incomplete (First, Second and Fifth Ways) or deficient in structure (Third Way). But Van Steenberghen takes particular aim at the Fourth Way. The argument is flawed principally because of its connection to Platonism. Van Steenberghen contends that a scholastic fondness for

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁵⁵ Fernand Van Steenberghen, *Hidden God: How Do We Know That God Exists?*, trans. Theodore Crowley, O.F.M. (Saint Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1966).

dialectic sometimes lured Thomas into committing the cardinal sin of the Platonist—that of conflating the real and the conceptual orders. The Fourth Way is evidence of this. There is no doubt that, within the conceptual order, one can speak of the “logical participation” of “generic and specific concepts” in the transcendental idea of being.⁵⁶ These concepts are the limiting “differences” that work to draw out the analogical richness of this idea, and thus they are always predicated in relation to their conceptual “maximum.” However, within the real order, the degrees of perfection show merely that being is “shared among finite beings.”⁵⁷ The question remains whether there exists a maximum in the real order. Under the spell of neo-Platonism, Thomas simply identifies the two orders. Without justification, he posits the existence of an Infinite Being, a maximum *ens*, upon which the “more and the less” depend. Implicit in the argument is the doctrine of participation, the teaching that “finite beings are participants in an Infinite Being.”⁵⁸ But this teaching is merely assumed by St. Thomas; it is not demonstrated. And, since it is not immediately evident that the perfection of being can exist beyond the order of finite beings, Van Steenberghen argues one cannot say whether the “more and the less” in the real order necessarily refer to a maximum. Thus, participation cannot serve as a premise or a step on the path toward God; in fact, it cannot—and should not—be introduced into the metaphysical mix until one has first demonstrated the actual existence of an Infinite Being. And this goal is not achieved by the *Quarta Via*.

Nor is Van Steenberghen’s judgment any less critical with respect to arguments that explicitly use participation. In a later work, he finds similar problems with Thomas’ argument from the *Lectura* on St. John’s Gospel. The proof in the *Lectura* rests upon the principle that “everything which is such by participation is reduced to something which is such of its essence.” Since all things “which exist participate in being,” and are thus “beings by participation,” Thomas concludes that there must exist something “which would be *esse* itself through its essence in that its essence would be its *esse*,” the “cause of all being,

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

from whom all things which exist participate in being.”⁵⁹ Though this argument represents a significant improvement over the Fourth Way, inasmuch as it expressly draws on participation, Van Steenberghen claims that it contains the same flaw—it begs the question. He concludes:

...by affirming that all the beings of this world are “beings by participation,” St Thomas assumes what he must demonstrate. At the point of departure, one can speak of *logical participation* (all beings participate in the transcendental idea of being) and establish that being is a perfection really *shared* by all the beings. But one can speak of *real participation* only after having established the existence of the Infinite Being, *Esse subsistens*.⁶⁰

What about De Raeymaeker? Does his devotion to the doctrine of participation compel him to use arguments his colleague rejects? In examining his work, it is best to keep in mind two important points. First, despite occasional references to such texts and an endorsement of the *Quarta Via*, De Raeymaeker does not directly model his proof upon any of these arguments. Secondly, unlike Van Steenberghen, who offers an historical-textual examination, De Raeymaeker is writing an “ontology of Thomist inspiration,” what W. Norris Clarke might call a “creative retrieval” of St. Thomas. Thus, he borrows from his master only what he needs in order to complete his argument.

⁵⁹ *Lectura super evangelium Johannis*, in *S. Thomae Aquinatis opera omnia*. vol. 6, ed. R. Busa, (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1980), 227: “Quidam autem venerunt in cognitionem dei ex dignitate ipsius dei: et isti fuerunt platonici. Consideraverunt enim quod omne illud quod est secundem participationem, reducitur ad aliquid quod sit illud per suam essentiam, sicut ad primum et ad summum; sicut omnia ignita per participationem reducuntur a dignem, qui est per essentiam suam talis. Cum ergo omnia quae sunt, participant esse, et sint per participationem entia, necesse est esse aliquid in cacumine omnium rerum, quod sit ipsum esse per suam essentiam, id est quod sua essentia sit suum esse: et hoc est deus, qui est sufficientissima, et dignissima, et perfectissima causa totius esse, a quo omnia quae sunt, participant esse.” (All translations of Aquinas are by the author.)

⁶⁰ Fernand Van Steenberghen, *Le problème de l'existence de Dieu dans les écrits de s. Thomas d'Aquin* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1980), 280. The English translation is by the author.

What do we find in *The Philosophy of Being*? At a crucial point in his proof, De Raeymaker provides textual support for his claim that multiplicity cannot “constitute” a reason for unity. He cites four passages from St. Thomas. The first three (*De Potentia* 7, a. 1; *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 41; and *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 18) employ some version of the formula, “diverse things, inasmuch as they are diverse, are not united” (*diversa autem, in quantum huiusmodi, non faciunt unum*). The final passage, taken from the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, q. 44, a. 1, refers to an argument in which Thomas cites Plato’s claim that “before all multiplicity we must posit unity” (*ante omnium multitudinem ponere unitatem*). This is an interesting, eclectic set of passages, but I suggest that, if we examine these texts closely, they will show how De Raeymaker’s proof draws upon some central themes in Thomistic metaphysics.

The first and third citations belong together, since both texts reason from the efficiently caused character of composite being to the absolute simplicity of God. Let us take the first text from *De Potentia* 7, a. 1. Composition implies diversity of parts in the thing composed. Now since “diverse things as such are not united,” Thomas argues, the distinct principles of a composite need some extrinsic cause to join them together. Furthermore, since every composite being exists solely on the basis of the union of its parts, it must depend upon a “prior agent” as well. But Thomas observes that God is “the First Being, from whom all things exist”; as such, He is uncaused and cannot be composite, but must be altogether simple.⁶¹

De Raeymaeker’s reference to this passage might seem curious at first. While Thomas does employ the principle found in his proof, he applies it here to the inner composition of finite being, and not to the order of being as a whole. Yet, as we have seen, De Raeymaeker later

⁶¹ *Quaestiones Disputatae De potentia Dei* in *S. Thomae Aquinatis opera omnia*. vol. 8 (Parma: Fiacadori, 1856; reprinted New York: Musurgia 1949), 147: “Secunda ratio est, quia cum compositio non sit nisi ex diversis, ipsa diversa indigent aliquot agente ad hoc quod uniantur. Non enim diversa, in quantum huiusmodi, unita sunt. Omne autem compositum habet esse, secundum quod ea ex quibus componitur, uniuntur. Oportet ergo quod omne compositum dependeat ab aliquot priore agente. Primum ergo ens, quod Deus est, a quo sunt omnia, non potest esse compositum.”

insists that the caused character of particular being can be established through an analysis of its internal structure. The external relativity characteristic of the finite order necessarily implies an inner relativity at the core of each being.

The second reference, drawn from the *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 41, belongs to a larger treatise (Chapters 39-45) concerning the question of the origin of the distinction of things in which Thomas eventually concludes (Chapter 45) that such "diversity" must have its reason in the "intention of God Himself." Chapter 41 is restricted more narrowly to showing that this distinction cannot be due to a diversity of agents. Thomas argues in the following manner: Ordered effects cannot proceed from diverse causes that are not ordered, because the diverse, inasmuch as they are diverse, cannot form a unity. Now distinct things in creation are discovered to be "ordered to each other," and not by chance, so that in the majority of cases "one is moved by another." It is thus impossible, Thomas concludes, that the distinction of things thus ordered would be on account of a "diversity of agents lacking order." Since unity cannot arise from diversity, the order that one finds in creation must at least be caused by ordered agents. But Thomas has just argued that if there were a diversity of ordered agents, these agents would ultimately find their principle in "some one cause" by which they are united. Such an agent would thus be "the first and sole cause of the distinction of things."⁶²

Of the four passages De Raeymaeker cites, this argument most closely resembles his own account. Both proofs proceed directly from an ordered diversity in being to a unitary cause of the order. Moreover, the dialectical tension found here between unity and diversity corresponds to the opposition between relativity and subsistence seen in *The Philosophy of Being*. Although its philosophical background needs to be developed (and, in particular, its association with the doctrine of

⁶² *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Turin: Marietti, 1922), 128: "A diversis causis non ordinatis non procedunt effectus ordinati, nisi forte per accidens; diversa autem, in quantum huiusmodi, non faciunt unum. Res autem distinctae inveniuntur habere ordinem ad invicem non casualiter, quum ut in pluribus unum ab alio moveatur. Impossibile est igitur quod distinctio rerum sic ordinarum sit propter diversitatem agentium non ordinatorum."

participation), the argument supplies a principal textual inspiration for the “metaphysical proof.”

The final passage, taken from the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, cites the Platonic claim that “before all multiplicity we must posit unity.” Question 44 concerns “the procession of creatures from God,” and its first article asks “whether it is necessary that every being be created by God.” Thomas suggests that whenever a perfection is “found in anything by participation,” this perfection “must be caused in it” by something that possesses the perfection “essentially.” Now he recalls his earlier demonstrations that God has been shown to be “*esse* itself subsisting through itself,” and that “subsisting being” must be one. Granting these claims, it follows that all beings other than God “participate in *esse*,” since “they would not be their own being”; that is, they do not possess the perfection of being essentially. Thus, inasmuch as all creatures are made diverse by their “diverse participation of being,” they must proceed from “one First Being.”⁶³

This argument should sound familiar. With some changes, Thomas adopted its basic structure in more formal proofs—notably in the argument found in the *Lectura* on St. John’s Gospel. Unfortunately, it suffers from the same defect that ruins the *Lectura* argument in that its guiding principle (that whatever exists by participation requires a cause) lacks a sound justification. Yet, while De Raeymaeker cites this passage because of its clear appeal to participation and its strong affirmation of his conclusion, it differs in structure and style from his own proof. He does not assume from the start that participation in

⁶³ *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars*, ed. P. Caramello (Turin-Rome, 1948), 224: Si enim aliquid invenitur in aliquo per participationem, necesse est quod causetur in ipso ab eo cui essentialiter convenit; sicut ferrum fit ignitum ab igne. Ostensum est autem supra, cum de divina simplicitate ageretur; quod Deus est ipsum esse per se subsistens. Et iterum ostensum est quod esse subsistens non potest esse nisi unum: sicut si albedo esset subsistens, non posset esse nisi una, cum albedines multiplicentur secundum recipientia. Relinquitur ergo quod omnia alia a Deo non sint suum esse, sed participant esse. Necesse est igitur omnia quae diversificantur secundum diversam participationem essendi, ut sint perfectius vel minus perfecte, causari ab uno primo ente, quod perfectissime est. Unde et Plato dixit quod necesse est ante omnium multitudinem ponere unitatem.”

being implies a first cause, nor does he “jump too quickly” to the Infinite Being as St. Thomas apparently does.

Now, when we consider all four passages together, we can see that they do more than provide a guided tour through De Raeymaeker’s Thomistic sources; they also retrace the movement of his argument in *The Philosophy of Being*. He starts with a reflection on the meaning of participation, attempting to draw out the full implications of this doctrine through an examination of the structure of finite being. The first three passages sketch a portrait of particular being in all of its radical dependence. Participation means external relativity (*Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 41); but external relativity in turn implies internal relativity, an inner structure of relations at the core of every particular being (*De Potentia* 7, a. 1; *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 18). And whether one considers the diverse finite terms bound together in the order of being, or the irreducibly distinct co-principles that compose the reality of particular being, we are dealing with a *complexus* whose unity must be explained. It is at this stage that De Raeymaeker can turn to the argument from the *Summa Theologiae*, for, having uncovered the “deep-seated relativity” in being, he is now in a position to conclude with Thomas that “whatever exists by participation is dependent on a cause.”

In the end, Van Steenberghen may be correct in his assessment of the Thomistic arguments from participation. The *Quarta Via* and the *Lectura* proofs take too much for granted. By employing the notion of participation, whether implicitly or explicitly, these arguments assume that the mere presence of degrees of “more and less” in being points immediately to a unitary cause responsible for the shared perfection. But De Raeymaeker does not make the same mistake. The “mystery of participation” is for him the fundamental problem in metaphysics, and it requires a thorough analysis of both the internal and external structure of finite being. Thus, far from begging the question, De Raeymaeker’s solution to this problem offers a complete explanation for the reasons why every participant in being requires a cause. In working this out, he calls upon all the elements of Thomistic metaphysics at his disposal. While his references may not always meet

the exacting demands of textual scholarship, his argument remains sound.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Nonetheless, I think there is another Thomistic argument that more closely parallels De Raeymaeker's in its style and structure. It does not contain an explicit reference to participation, but the doctrine seems present therein. This is the well-known proof from plurality, from the "many to the one," and its classic formulation is found in *De Potentia*, q. 3, a. 5. The proof in Article 5, just like the passage in Question 44 of the *Summa Theologiae*, is principally devoted to showing that all things are created by God, though it can stand independently as an argument for God's existence. It runs thus:

Oportet enim, si aliquid unum communiter in pluribus invenitur, quod ab aliqua una causa in illis causetur; non enim potest esse quod illud commune utrique ex seipso conveniat, cum utrumque, secundum quod ipsum est, ab altero distinguatur; et diversitas causarum diversos effectus producit. Cum ergo esse inveniatur omnibus rebus commune, quae secundum illud quod sunt, ad invicem distinctae sunt, oportet quod de necessitate eis non ex seipsis, sed ab aliqua una causa esse attribuat. Et ista videtur ratio Platonis, qui voluit quod ante omnem multitudinem esse aliqua unitas, non solum in numeris, sed etiam in rerum naturis": *Quaestiones Disputatae De potentia Dei in S. Thomae Aquinatis opera Omnia*, Vol. 8 (Parma: Fiacadori, 1856; reprinted New York: Musurgia, 1949), 33.

(It is necessary that, if something common is found in many, that something must be caused in them by some one cause. For it is not possible that this common feature belongs to each one by reason of itself, since each according to what it is by itself, is distinguished from the others, and diversity of causes produces diversity of effects. Therefore, since being is found common to all things, which according to what they are are distinct from one another, it is necessary for being to be attributed to them not by themselves, but from some one cause. This seems to be the reasoning of Plato who claimed that before all multiplicity there must be some unity not only in numbers but in the nature of things.)

We have here, stated in somewhat different terms, the basic elements of De Raeymaeker's argument. Despite their very real diversity as subsistent subjects, particular beings share a fundamental likeness in being. The principle of their agreement, the source of their ontological similarity, cannot be placed at the door of particular beings themselves—either singly or collectively—because, considered as distinct individuals, they differ from

And De Raeymaeker's approach has a solid basis in the work of St. Thomas. Van Steenberghe goes too far in suggesting that one must forgo any reference to the doctrine of participation in constructing a formal proof for God's existence. He writes as if participation can mean only two things for Thomas: the "logical" participation of generic and specific concepts in the idea of being, or the "ontological" participation of all finite beings in *esse subsistens*, Infinite Being. Yet Thomas offers a much more comprehensive (and nuanced) treatment of this problem in his work. As John F. Wippel has recently shown, Thomas does refer to "ontological" and "logical" participation, but he also writes of finite being's "participation in *esse commune*."⁶⁵ When considering this form of participation, Thomas means only that finite being partakes of the "perfection signified by the term *esse*," that each being according to what it is possesses its own proper "*esse*" or *actus essendi*. This is no doubt the role participation plays in *The Philosophy of Being*, and it is a perfectly respectable philosophical approach to God. As De Raeymaeker has shown, on the basis of a critical examination of participation, one must eventually raise the question of causality. In considering this approach, Wippel notes:

One may move from one's discovery of individual beings as participating in *esse commune* to the caused character of such beings, and then on to the existence of the unparticipated source (*esse subsistens*). Once this is established, one can then speak of them as actually participating in *esse subsistens* as well.⁶⁶

I believe that this is the approach Louis De Raeymaeker adopts in his brilliant "retrieval" of Thomistic metaphysics. The "metaphysical proof" remains an argument grounded upon St. Thomas' teaching on participation.

each other, and diversity or multiplicity as such cannot produce similarity or unity. To explain this "common feature," a cause is required, and given that the perfection in question is being, the absolute and most "profound" value, this cause must be the unique and total creative source of the entire order.

⁶⁵ Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 117.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.