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METAPHYSICAL TURN

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Being and the Twenty-First Century Thomist



While in the second grade my son had to do a report on the theme “What does my Daddy do?” So one evening I sat down with him and began to answer by saying, “Well, I study and teach philosophy.” So far so good as I helped John write down “philosophy” by spelling it out. But John’s next question was “And what is philosophy about?” If I did not know my son, I would have felt a trap being laid for me. On the one hand, I could answer boringly and prosaically by giving the usual litany of all the issues with which philosophy deals. On the other hand, I could cut to the chase and answer the question in its truest and most direct, but unfortunately esoteric, fashion. I went for the latter. “John, philosophy is about being.” Instantly I could see the glaze form over his young eyes and I knew that I had just lost communication. Yes, there is something weird about the word “being” such that its mention invariably causes mental static to break out in one’s hearers. Nevertheless, the topic of being witnessed a great revival in the twentieth century. I am thinking of the popularity of Heidegger and Sartre and the thinkers of the Thomistic revival. The greater popularity appears to have gone to the first two because both were able to combine discussion of being with the drama of human subjectivity. Undoubtedly this combination was because both Heidegger and Sartre, like so many others since Kant, had made the transcendental turn. In fact, among the twentieth century Thomists it was the Transcendental Thomists Rahner and Lonergan who proved to have the greater staying power. Other Thomists (let us call them the “Neo-Thomists”) discussed being as an abstraction from things

and so missed the subject as subject. When they discussed the subject, they did it in terms of categories taken from things. Hence their treatment of the subject appeared to be too objective, too cool, too non-historical, to interest the current philosophical public. This criticism of Neo-Thomism can be discerned in Lonergan's remarks about the neglected and truncated subject in his 1968 Marquette Aquinas lecture entitled, *The Subject*.

I believe that there has understandably been some dropping of the ball by the Neo-Thomists. Because Kantian-style transcendental thinkers have lionized subjectivity in philosophy, Neo-Thomists have avoided a topic that they fear would cost them their metaphysics. And so I want to illustrate how one can exploit the Neo-Thomist understanding of the person as an abstractor of being to allow the entire spectrum of human subjectivity to parade before the philosopher's eyes.

I. Being as "the Bird that is a Flock"

What do I mean by "being?" I mean an intelligibility. By an intelligibility I mean a commonality, a sameness, grasped in the real things given in sensation, that is, in what you are aware of right now as you look this way and listen.¹ For example, my awareness of this right angle triangle, this isosceles triangle, and this equilateral triangle is more than an awareness of three figures. More accurately speaking, my awareness is of three figures *with something in common*. We mean to express this commonality by the word "triangle." The portion of our awareness that bears upon commonalities is called "intellection" or "conceptualization."

In his *Disputed Questions on Truth* q. 1, and q. 21, a. 1, Aquinas explains that there are two kinds of commonalities. On the one hand, we can intellect a commonality apart from the differences of the individual instances. "Triangle" is such a case. The proof lies in the reflection that its differences can be found in non-triangular figures. The right angle that is the difference of the first figure can be found in a rectangle; the two equal sides of the isosceles triangle can be in a quadrilateral, and so on. In sum, if we intellect the commonality within the very differences, then the differences

1. Aquinas describes *ens* as a *ratio* and an *aliquid unum* (*In I Sent.*, Prol. q. 1, a. 2, ad 2m), as a *natura communis* (*In I Sent.*, d. 19, q. 5, a. 2, ad 1m), as *commune* (*In Meta*, proem) and as *universale* (*De veritate* [DV] I, q. 21, a. 1). These are all ways of speaking about the intellect's absolute consideration or first operation, conceptualization.

would carry the sameness wherever they appeared. But the differences do not. Commonalities of this type are called univocal commonalities.

On the other hand, we also intellect commonalities precisely within the very differences of the instances. This alternative might sound unbelievable. It seems to have been missed by Scotus who thought that if there was an intelligible unity between things, then *ipso facto* it must be univocal.² Consider the manner in which sanctity, or love of God, is applied to Teresa of Avila and to Francis Xavier. The first was a contemplative, the second a missionary. Yet different as these are, in the cases of Teresa and Francis they have a sameness that allows one to call each a saint. The very thing that makes Teresa different from Francis, namely, her contemplation, is the very thing that makes her the same as Francis, and vice versa. So to find what makes both the same, you have to go to the very things that differentiate both. The sameness lies in the differences. A double check lies in the realization that wherever you find contemplation like Teresa's, you find a great lover of God. Because the difference drags along the sameness, the sameness must be understood as within, not apart from, the difference.

Commonalities that behave in this manner are called analogical concepts. Scholastics also called them analogons. The instances that by their differences convey the analogon the Scholastics called analogates.³ Hence, "saint" is the analogon, while Teresa and Francis are analogates of it. Because analogous concepts are samenesses perceived within differences, they lack the clarity and distinctness of univocal concepts that, as mentioned, we apprehend apart from the differences of the instances. Yet what analogons give up in clarity and distinctness, they make up for in richness of content. The analogates of Teresa and Francis enable us dimly to perceive the analogon of "great lover of God" that contains these analogates plus who knows how many more. We know that a Christian who lived in the fifth century would have been a fool to claim that he had seen all that there was to see of "great lover of God." Even though our Christian would have known Peter, Stephen, and Augustine, he would not yet have seen

2. In the Middle Ages, others, e.g., Thomas of Sutton and Hervaeus Natalis, denied a notion of being by claiming the notion was a disjunction. So what we meant by being was the understanding that things are either infinite or finite, substance or accident. But if there is not to be a complete arbitrariness here, one must insist "Why these alternatives?" Is not the disjunction dependent upon the recognition of a commonality in the disjuncts?

3. On the terminology, see George P. Klubertanz, *St. Thomas on Analogy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1960), 6-7.

Benedict, Francis of Assisi, and Ignatius. This is why the parade of saints through the centuries is such an astonishing thing to watch. Each, through its differences, permits one to see a little more of the depths of love.

So, any analogon is an intrinsically fascinating object. An analogon possesses a richness of content that is only partially revealed through its analogates. In a surprising reversal of the situation with univocal commonalities, the background that is the analogon will always contain much more than is in the foreground. Now the impoverishment is in the data and the richness is in the commonality. This realization makes analogons fascinating objects of study. We want to plumb their depths, we want to know more of the richness. Unfortunately we cannot gaze on the analogon itself. Rather, we are condemned to increase our knowledge of the analogon only by increasing our knowledge of the analogates, which through new and unheard of differences reveal a little more of the analogon. The current inability to appreciate knowledge as intrinsically valuable makes sense if our intellectual life is fundamentally understood in terms of univocal concepts. As a sameness-apart-from difference, the univocal commonality is something more impoverished than the data from which it is abstracted. Hence, with univocal commonalities, it is impossible to provide any luster to the ideal of knowing just for the sake of knowing. The far richer sensible data will win every time. Understood in univocal terms, knowing can take on the appearance of value only extrinsically. This is the strategy that has been adopted since modern times, even for higher education. Knowing is related to some practical pursuit, for example, better engineering, better medicine, better entertainment. But an intrinsic value for knowing has been completely lost. Such is the result if knowing is fundamentally understood in terms of univocal commonalities.

But among analogons exists a special type. Scholastics called this type transcendental.⁴ It is superior to the previous examples of analogons. Even though any analogon makes its way into a startling array of different analogates which our experience probably never exhausts, not all analogons are transcendentals. There are some differences into which some analogons cannot make their way. For example, Fido in his differences and the pine tree on the lawn with its differences will never manifest the analogon of

4. "[Being, *ens*] is what the Scholastics called a transcendental object of thought." Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. by Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 210. Aquinas appears to call being a transcendental at ST I, q. 30, a. 3.

sanctity. Yet there are analogons that are illustrated by the differences of *all* things. And an example would be that of the notion or intelligibility of being, the *ratio entis*. Everything—for example, myself, the tree, Fido, Teresa, and Xavier—is a being or an actuality in a different way. At the very beginning of his *Disputed Questions on Truth* especially, but elsewhere⁵ also, Aquinas indicates why we must regard being as an analogon that is transcendental. The reason simply is that if the differences of being were in anyway extrinsic to the analogous concept of being, then the differences would reduce themselves to non-being, and so actuality would take the form of one undifferentiated thing. In other words, the differences of things in order to differentiate have to be actual; but as actual they will be included within the *ratio entis*.

What I mean by the *ratio entis* is wider than, hence not identical to, *ens mobile*. Being includes cognition. Human awareness is never so focused on things that it loses an awareness of itself.⁶ But, for Aquinas, sensory cognition *qua* cognition involves a spiritual change (*immutatio spiritualis*).⁷ Hence, in that respect cognition resists categorization in the types of physical changes that comprise *ens mobile*. The phenomenon of cognition drives the intellect to frame the wider intelligibility of being.

To intellectually apprehend being is to experience an earthquake in one's intellectual life. Everything becomes of interest, because every thing in its uniqueness gives one another look at the *ratio entis*, whose treasure contains this difference and who knows what else. In my opinion, the analogous conceptualization of being provides the explanation from subjectivity of Aristotle's external observation in the first book of his *Metaphysics* that knowledge is intrinsically valuable because it is still sought after practical needs and necessities have been met.⁸ Nevertheless, one would be wrong to think that intellectual pursuit demands an explicit philosophical presentation of the above. Aquinas understands being as such an automatic and

5. DV q. 21, a. 1; *Summa contra Gentiles* (SCG) I, q. 25, no. 6; ST I, q. 3, a. 5.

6. See Aquinas's *In XII Meta.*, lect. 11, no. 2608, on Aristotle's remark "But science, perception, opinion and thought always seem to be about something else and only indirectly about themselves."

7. See ST I, q. 78, a. 3. At. *In III De anima*, lect. 12 and in comparison to the change studied by the natural philosopher, this type of change, also found in understanding (*intelligere*) and willing (*velle*), is called change improperly speaking, for it does not involve the destruction of a previously existing contrary. In *In V de Trinitate* 4, ad 3m, and 2, ad 7m, this type of change is reserved for the study of the metaphysician..

8. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.2, 982b22–27.

natural abstraction from self-manifestly real things provided by sensation that the *ratio entis* can lie unnoticed in the depths of our conscious life and nevertheless have conscious effects. Such thinking about being goes a long way to explain why the principle of non-contradiction (“Something cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect”), which is about being, is self-evident to all, even to those who never thought about analogous conceptualization and transcendentals.

In the great Thomist revival of the previous century, the famous French Thomist Jacques Maritain wrote most passionately of the intellectual perception of being. Maritain calls it the intuition of being, *l'intuition de l'être*. Some classic texts from his greatest work, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, chapter 5, section 3, are as follows:

Even in the perception of the generic or specific nature the intellect attains in the individual more than the individual itself. It attains a universal object of concept communicable to all the individuals of the same species or of the same genus. And this is called *univocal*, since presented to the mind by a plurality of transobjective subjects and restored to them in judgments, it is purely and simply one and the same in the mind. *Unum in multis*, it is an invariant without actual multiplicity, realized in several, and by that very fact positing among them a community of essence. But in the perception of the transcendentals, we attain in a nature more than itself, an object of concept not only transindividual, but trans-specific, trans-generic, transcategorical, as if in opening a blade of grass one started a bird greater than the world. Let us call such an object of concept *super-universal*. The scholastics call it *analogous*, ... It differs essentially, even as a concept, from the universals, not only because it has a greater amplitude, but also and primarily ... it is polyvalent, it envelops an actual multiplicity; the bird we spoke of a moment ago is at the same time a flock.

Maritain leaves the inimitable prose of “a bird that is at the same time a flock” for a more prosaic and philosophically garbed description:

Everything which divides [electrons and angels] from one another is the same being which I find in each of them—varied. I simply have to fix my attention on it to see that it is at once one and multiple. It *would be* purely and simply one if its differentiations were not still itself, or to put it otherwise, if the analogue presented to the mind made complete abstraction from the analogates; if I could think being without thereby rendering present to my mind (whether I am *de facto* explicitly aware of this or not is quite accidental) in essentially different ways some of the others in which this object of concept is realizable outside the mind. It *would be* purely and simply multiple if it did not transcend its differentiations, or, to put

it otherwise, if the analogue presented to the mind made no abstraction from its analogates: in which case the word “being” would be purely equivocal and my thought would fly to pieces.

These texts reiterate the point that an analogous concept is not picked out apart from the differences of its instances, but within those very differences.

II. Being and Its Epiphanies

Yet if the abstraction of the *ratio entis* is important for understanding the generation of the pure, disinterested, desire to know, it is also the basis for our practical lives. I want to continue Aquinas’s phenomenology of the human intellector of being for purposes of understanding both the basis of a moral life that is heroic and the fact that so few are faithful to it. To do this I want to begin speaking about the first principle of practical reason, or of Aquinas’s natural law. At ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2, Aquinas presents “The good ought to be done and pursued, and evil avoided” as a *per se notum*, or self-evident, proposition. By a *per se notum* proposition Aquinas says that he means a proposition in which the meaning of the predicate is contained in the meaning of the subject. How is Aquinas understanding “the good,” the *ratio boni*, so that the notion includes “oughtness”? By the good Aquinas also means the notion of being, the *ratio entis*, which he also mentions as the basis of the first principle of speculative reason—the principle of non-contradiction. It makes sense to call being the good because of the previously mentioned intelligible richness of a transcendental analogon. Aquinas remarks that the last end moves the will automatically because it is the perfect good.⁹ Aquinas also remarks that “goodness expresses perfection, which is something desirable, and hence it expresses something final.”¹⁰ The good is the perfect and the perfect is the attractive. That proposition certainly applies to the transcendental of being. Being should then command attraction from the will.

From his linking of being with the good, Aquinas elsewhere deduces two things. The first is a necessary and automatic volition consequent upon the intellect’s presentation of the *ratio boni* to the will. There is no moral necessity here because there is no freedom. The will acts automati-

9. ST I-II, q. 10, a. 2, ad 3.

10. ST I, q. 5, a. 1.

cally. Earlier at ST I-II, q. 10, a. 1, Aquinas said that the will tends naturally to the good in common (*bonum in communi*), just as the intellect knows naturally the first principles of demonstration.¹¹ The second implication of linking being with the good is the indeterminate disposing of the will before any individual thing that is only “a” good, not the good itself. Now the will is free but moral constraint, or oughtness, still seems absent. Rather, what is present is an awareness of being equally and indifferently disposed to all finite goods.¹² These two points are significant additions to Aquinas’s phenomenology of subjectivity. Yet the issue remains of how we are to configure properly being as the good so that precisely moral obligation, not necessary volition nor raw freedom, follows. In that way one would understand “Good ought to be done” as self-evident.

My resolution of the issue is the realization that Aquinas is not speaking of being as the good pure and simple, but of being as the good when present in the human through the human’s intellection.¹³ Among all the instances of being as the good, the human, through his intellection, has the good in an especially intense manner. Does not that fact issue to our freedom a command of respect and solicitude? Before such an instance we are free undoubtedly, but we are also morally constrained. In sum, the subject of the first practical principle should not be understood simply as the good but as the good intellected by the human.

So the first rule of a moral life is to be respectful and solicitous of the human person. The human person is the lighthouse from which shines the good and to which we should direct our moral vessel. For example, the immorality of murder, theft, and lying is patent. In striking at the person, each of these actions strikes unseemly at the good. Also, our awareness of ourselves as intellectors of being creates the injunctions to do what respects our existence and to avoid what disrespects it, for example, abuse and suicide. Moreover, by its essentially unitive and procreative character the sexual embrace is unique among human activities. In one’s sexual partner and also in

11. Also, at ST I, q. 82, a. 1, Aquinas says that just as the intellect necessarily adheres to the first principles, so too the will necessarily adheres to the last end which is happiness (*ultimo fini, qui est beatitudo*). But “happiness” here is the *ratio boni* for elsewhere the last end is the object of the will (ST I-II, q. 10, a. 1) and the object of the will is said to be the *ratio boni* (ST I-II, q. 8, a. 2). Also, at ST I-II, q. 10, a. 2, ad 3, “The last end moves the will necessarily, because it is the perfect good [*bonum perfectum*].”

12. ST I-II, q. 10, a. 2.

13. See John F. X. Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 261–72.

the procreative teleology of the sexual embrace, one is handling the good and so sexual activity ought to be exercised in the context of a committed monogamous relation, that is, of marriage. The fornicator and adulterer unseemingly discard the *ratio boni* given in the sexual embrace.

The evil of contraception is likewise evident. By striking at the procreative powers, contraceptors strike at the *ratio boni* in the offspring who is at least essentially, if not actually, present. Great lovers take this norm of respect and solicitude of the human person with deep seriousness. Their most important thing is other people, or life in society. Nothing should be substituted for people and their well-being, not hobbies, studies, pleasure, money, fame, and so forth. Pursuit of these things must always defer to the needs of persons. Aquinas's conception of the human as an intellector of being also makes understandable the self-sacrifice involved in friendship. Following Aristotle Aquinas roots friendship in self-love.¹⁴ What I find loveable in myself, namely, the notion of being, is found in others. Hence, my fellow is another self. In this context, my loss should not be looked at simply as another's gain. To see the other as a friend is to see my loss for his sake as *our* gain. Love for self extended to others makes it possible to genuinely rejoice in their good fortune, even when that good fortune demands a sacrifice from us. Jealousy should have no place among people if they relate to each other as friends. And people should relate to others as friends if they view themselves as intellectors of being. The deep truth here is indicated by its contrary, namely, rejection and its lacerating effect of isolation. Since being is so intensely present in our fellows, then their rejection of us can appear as being's rejection of us. And since being includes all, rejection can be experienced as total isolation. That is why though we may disagree, we should always remain friends.

III. Being as Hiding and Revealing Itself

In sum, the above shows that for Aquinas reality itself prompts us to love. His epistemology of intellectual abstraction from the real things given to us in sensation establishes confidence in the notion of being. Being is not a pipe dream but a deep plunge into reality. In Thomistic psychology

14. See James McEvoy, "The Other as Oneself: Friendship and Love in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas," in *Thomas Aquinas: Approaches to Truth*, edited by James McEvoy and Michael Dunne (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002).

love is not to suffer a delusion. Reality itself provides the motivation. But as so relentlessly developed from the real, Aquinas's ethics prompts another question. If we are structured as Aquinas says, why is human experience marked by so much disagreement about how to behave? For example, how do proponents of euthanasia respect their own existence; how do proponents of recreational sex acknowledge its procreative and unitive nature; how do institutions of higher learning continue to acknowledge the intrinsic value of knowing, never mind Aquinas's mentioned obligation to know the truth about God? In fact, Aquinas seems to force the issue. At ST I-II, q. 94, a. 6, he claims that "as to the common principles, natural law, in its universal meaning, cannot in any way be blotted out from men's hearts."¹⁵ Earlier in article 4, Aquinas describes these principles as equally known to all and as self-evident to us. Now it is possible that opponents of Aquinas clearly understand these common principles but are driven by passions and bad habits to live otherwise. Aquinas does assign to the passions a large role in engendering immorality. But on the other hand, among ordinary people, how many, if any, have cognizance of the connection between "oughtness" and the human as an intellector of being? In short, the drama of real human life still appears to escape Aquinas's analyses. Better to turn to an existentialist like Heidegger or Marcel or Kierkegaard to supplement a naivety in Aquinas. A treatment of this disconnect from the side of subjectivity would be invaluable for any Thomist who ponders going forth into his cultural milieu.

The intellectual character of Aquinas's position should not be held against it, for Aquinas does not equate a proposition being self-evident to us with our explicit acknowledgement of the proposition. Like the human heart that functions automatically but with conscious effects, so too the intellect can automatically abstract the notion of being and grasp it as the good. Such an automatic abstraction can go a long way to explain why people try to avoid contradiction, yearn for something that life cannot give, and experience freedom and also obligation. Evidently we know more than we are aware, as I would like now to explain.

Despite the *quoad nos* self-evident character of the primary practical precepts, Aquinas holds a dim view of the workings of the intellect. For ex-

15. *The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), 2:781. All English quotations from the *Summa theologiae* are from this translation.

ample, in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG) III, chap. 26, he explains that it is not strange that humans act for sensual pleasures rather than intellectual ones because most humans lack intellectual experience. For this lack Aquinas appeals to his abstractionist epistemology. He says that external things are better known because human cognition begins from sensible things.¹⁶ Later in the same work at IV, chap. 52, he speaks of the “frailty of reason: *debilitas rationis*” and of the predominance of the phantasms. But instead of contradicting Aquinas’s position that the primary precepts are known to all, these remarks produce a better understanding of Aquinas’s position. For one would be wrong to interpret these remarks to mean that the workings of the intellect are totally absent or that these workings have no experienced effects. Even though our attention is focused on sensible things, our intellection has gone on to grasp commonalities of which we are still unaware. How else does one explain that we abide by the non-contradiction principle, are inevitably dissatisfied by finite goods, and know that we are free in respect to anything in our experience? These phenomena show that the notion of being haunts the human mind. A clever Thomist would seize upon each phenomenon to lead the person to realize something that the person in fact already knows, namely, the notion of being and the understanding of being as the good. So much of Thomism is making the implicit explicit, to rob some language from Transcendental Thomism.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, our awareness of things and the intelligibilities that things contain is never so focused that all self-awareness is lost. Hence, we cannot but have some awareness of ourselves as intellectors of being. So, with avoidance of contradiction, yearning, and freedom, the phenomenon of obligation is another outcropping indicating the presence of the *abstractum* of being in the depths of human consciousness. Again, we know more than we are aware. While our attention is on sensible things, or phantasms, the intellect can be doing its own work with the mentioned results.

So, a Thomist is not upset that most people appear to be living with no

16. “Nor do more persons seek the pleasure that is associated with knowing rather than the knowledge. Rather, there are more people who seek sensual pleasures than intellectual knowledge and its accompanying pleasure, because things that are external stand out as better known, since human knowledge starts from sensible objects.” As translated by Vernon J. Bourke, *Summa contra Gentiles* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975) 3:109–110. All English quotations from book 3 (parts 1 and 2, indicated below as I-III and II-III, following the convention used for the *Secunda pars* of the *Summa theologiae*) of the SCG are from this translation.