

- mensurando eas quasi ad sua principia. Intellectus autem, cum dicatur per respectum ad actum, potentiam animæ designat: virtus enim, sive potentia, est medium inter essentiam et operationem ...”
- 19 *De Veritate*, Q. 10. a. 1. resp. “Unde, cum secundum id quod est altissimum in nobis divina imago inveniat in nobis, imago non pertinebit ad essentiam animæ nisi secundum mentem prout nominat altissimam potentiam eius.”
- 20 *De Veritate*, Q. 10 a. 13, resp. “Propria autem personarum sunt relationes, quibus personæ non ad creaturas sed ad invicem referuntur. Unde naturali cognitione in propria personarum devenire non possumus.”
- 21 §2 “Aliena sane non est Ecclesia, neque esse potest, hoc ab inquirendi opere. Ab eo enim tempore, cum intra Paschale Mysterium postremam accepit de hominis vita veritatem uti donum ...”

Fides et Ratio and the Twentieth Century Thomistic Revival

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I want to speak about the place of *Fides et Ratio* within the parameters of the twentieth century Thomistic revival. To do that I must first describe the revival Three strains of Thomistic interpretation characterized the revival before Vatican II: Aristotelian Thomism, Existential Thomism and Transcendental Thomism. The first two were *a posteriori* in their epistemology.¹ The mind abstractly draws its fundamental conceptual content from the human knower’s contact with the self-manifestly real things given in sensation. Among the concepts abstracted are the transcendentals, chief among which is the *ratio entis*, the notion or concept of being. It is an analogical commonality, and so a sameness within difference, whose analogates are absolutely everything, actual and conceivable.²

Aristotelian Thomists and Existential Thomists dispute among themselves about the precise definition of being. The Aristotelian Thomists say that a being basically is a possessor of formal act (*forma*). This thinking derives from their central use of Aristotle’s hylomorphic analysis of changeable sensible substance. What impresses these Thomists is the definiteness and determinateness of sensible things. These aspects are rooted in the substantial form of a thing that is understood to be caused in matter by a moving agent. Ultimately this

moving agent is an unmoved mover that is, in their opinion, identifiable with the Christian God.³

Most famous of the Existential Thomists were Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. They proposed a more fundamental description of being in terms of existential act.⁴ The Existential Thomists use what they regard as Aquinas' philosophically novel doctrine of *esse*, or *actus essendi*.⁵ The "existence of a thing" does not mean simply the fact of the thing though ordinary conversation does leave it at that. Philosophical reflection discerns that the thing's existence is an act of the thing somewhat similarly as a man's running and speaking are other acts, though existential act is unique in its basicness and fundamentality to the thing. In creatures, the act of existing is participated; in the creator it is subsistent. Such a first cause is identifiable with the God of Judeo-Christian revelation who in the Vulgate told Moses that his name was "*Ego sum qui sum*".

Despite this disagreement both camps agree on the mind's ability to work out in a *posteriori* fashion transcendental concepts, i.e., analogous commonalities that apply to absolutely everything. Hence, both camps are of the opinion that in principle, if not in fact, a single fundamental science of the real exists. No matter where or when one lives, the real beings before him in sensation are sufficient for the human intellect to work out *a posteriori* the analogous concept of being and to correctly read its nature. Consequently, if metaphysics is expressive of the crowning natural achievement of the human mind, then obviously theology must be done in terms of this one, true metaphysics. Otherwise, theology would have no connection to existing human knowers. Hence, *de jure* only one, true theology exists. From the vantage point of these two camps, it is not possible to have great metaphysics and great theologies that are all true, just as it is possible to have varied great athletes that are all genuine. If they are worthy of their name, various metaphysics bear on the transcendental of being, and they do this adequately or not.

The third strain of twentieth century Thomistic interpretation is Transcendental Thomism. It follows a different epistemology from the others.⁶ At its most fundamental level, human knowing involves not reception from the real but a projection of the knower upon the real. The knower's projection is the knower's own intellectual dynamism to the unconceptualizable term of Infinite Being. Hence, the intellect's basic contact with reality is not through concepts abstracted from things, as is the case in the previous two camps. Rather, the intellect's contact is through its own dynamism to Infinite Being. In the life of the mind, prior to static concepts is intellectual dynamism.

Intellectual dynamism is not only innate, or *a priori*. It is also “constitutive” of human awareness. Thanks to its immersion in the dynamism, the data of sense can profile themselves in consciousness as finite and limited in perfection. A refrain among Transcendental Thomists is: “You can know the finite only if you know the infinite: you can know the limited only if you know the unlimited.”⁷ Both the finite and the limited appear only in juxtaposition to the infinite and unlimited. The intellect’s dynamism to Infinite Being is what sets up that juxtaposition. As so held before consciousness, the data permit the abstraction of analogous concepts as described in the traditional Thomist account of knowledge and repeated by Aristotelian and Existential Thomists. But for Transcendental Thomists that traditional account is by itself insufficient. It fails to explain the initial setting up of the sense data as the finite beings that they are.

It is helpful to understand Transcendental Thomist epistemology in terms of an extrapolation from visual experience. We see the outlines of things, things “objectify” themselves, only up and against something larger. For instance we see the frame only against the wall, and we see the Cathedral clock tower only against the sky. The wall and the sky are conditions for the perception of these objects. “Objectification” only happens in the light of something larger. Similarly, things are appreciated as *finite* beings, as realities not having all perfection, up and against something—Absolute Being, the term of intellectual dynamism. Intellectual dynamism places an “intellectual sky” against which things can profile themselves as beings of finite perfection.

The *a posteriori* Thomists will not dispute the facts but the Transcendental Thomist interpretation of them. In terms of his immediate realism for sensation, the *a posteriori* Thomist will understand the objectification of things as finite beings in terms of an automatic and natural abstraction of the *ratio entis*. Against the richness of that *abstractum*, things will appear as finite beings. No need exists to understand the intellectual backdrop as an *a priori* projection of the human knower. The Transcendental Thomist will be quick to reply that the immediate realism presumed by this abstractive account is just naive and dogmatic. Descartes’ dream and hallucination possibilities and the relativity in perception hammered on by the empiricists explain why since the modern period no philosophers of note have espoused that the data of sensation are self-manifestly real.

Transcendental Thomism claims to be a more in depth presentation of the human knower than was achieved by Immanuel Kant. Hence, the name of this third camp. The Transcendental Thomists take exception to the metaphysical scepticism of Kant’s first *Critique*. Any doubts about

the non-distortive character of intellectual dynamism are resolved by its ineluctability. Doubt about something presupposes the ability to envisage other possibilities. But since intellectual dynamism is constitutive of human consciousness, any doubt about it will employ it. Hence, the doubt destroys itself. Transcendental Thomism calls this defence of realism retorsion or performative self-contradiction.⁸ They find a basis for it in Aquinas' commentary on Aristotle's defence of the non-contradiction principle at *Metaphysics IV*. Other Thomists are not impressed.⁹

Because of its epistemology, Transcendental Thomism has a different relation than a *posteriori* Thomism to the undeniable fact of philosophical pluralism.¹⁰ *A posteriori* Thomism claimed that despite the facts, in principle only one, true philosophy exists. This is because there is a single concept of being for all men who are struggling to understand how to fundamentally describe it. Transcendental Thomists claim that in principle one, true philosophy cannot exist. Since all concepts form in the wake of intellectual dynamism, then no concept adequately catches the end of the dynamism. Hence, far from being in contradiction to each other, each great metaphysics is a true but finite conceptual attempt to express the intellectual dynamism. Somewhat similarly each great athlete is a true but finite expression of the greatness that is common to all.

All three currents streamed into Vatican II. But, as a matter of historical fact, only Transcendental Thomism emerged with any vibrancy. In the time since and especially in its use by theologians Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, and Bernard J. F. Lonergan, Transcendental Thomism has been the reigning Thomism. How does *Fides et Ratio* position itself with regard to these Thomistic camps? Of course, the dominant theme in the encyclical is the Pope's plea to philosophers not to despair. The human mind has the ability to know absolute truth—truth that is certain and holding for all times and places (§ 27). A self-doubt exists among philosophers who since the Enlightenment have done their thinking independent of the Church. Ironically, it is now the Church that is encouraging philosophers. But what is striking is the “metaphysical” character of the Pope's plea. By my count, the word “metaphysics,” or its equivalent “philosophy of being,” is mentioned at least twenty three times. The Pope describes the desired metaphysics both in general and in particular. In general, he characterizes it in three ways. First, a philosophy of genuinely metaphysical range transcends empirical data in order to attain something absolute, ultimate, and foundational in its search for truth” (§ 83). This truth includes the truth of God's existence. Second, language is regarded as having the capacity

to express transcendent reality in statements “that are simply true.” Such statements involve “... certain basic concepts [that] retain their universal epistemological value and thus retain the truth of the propositions in which they are expressed” (§ 96, also n. 113). Third, earlier, the encyclical describes philosophical knowledge of God in *a posteriori* terms. This knowledge begins from the creatures that are sensible things and reaches God as creator. In other words, it reaches God in “causal” terms (§ 19).

Even at this point the encyclical has to be a disappointment both to the Aristotelian and Transcendental Thomist. To philosophically reach God, the Aristotelian Thomist would use the proof from motion understood as an argument within natural philosophy, not metaphysics. The Transcendental Thomist would disparage causal inquiry for the transcendental analysis of the *a priori* conditions of consciousness. Though the encyclical repeatedly speaks of the “wonder” that begins philosophy (§ 4), the “stirring” and “ceaseless effort” of the human mind (§ 14), “a seed of desire and nostalgia for God” in the “far reaches of the human heart” (§ 24), the search for truth “so deeply rooted in human nature” (§ 29), “the human being’s characteristic openness to the universal and the transcendent” (§ 70), “the religious impulse innate in every person” (§ 81), none of these descriptions corresponds to what the Transcendental Thomist calls the *a priori* intellectual dynamism. Rather, they all occur within the *a posteriori* context mentioned above. Sensible reality is what excites the mind and stirs it into causal inquiry that reaches God. The capacity of the mind to be excited in this way is what the encyclical means by the innate religious impulse.

These observations would lead one to correlate the encyclical with Existential Thomism. It is *a posteriori* and reserves knowledge of God to metaphysics. But the encyclical does the reader a favour by itself making the connection. While discussing the help that the *intellectus fidei* [the understanding of the faith, or theology] obtains from philosophy, the Pope emphasizes the value of a metaphysics, or philosophy of being, that is based on the very act of being:

If the *intellectus fidei* wishes to integrate all the wealth of the theological tradition, it must turn to the philosophy of being, which should be able to propose anew the problem of being and this in harmony with the demands and insights of the entire philosophical tradition, including philosophy of more recent times, without lapsing into sterile repetition of antiquated formulas. Set within the Christian metaphysical tradition, the philosophy of being is a dynamic philosophy which views reality in its ontological, causal and communicative structures. It is strong and enduring because it is based

upon the very act of being itself, which allows a full and comprehensive openness to reality as a whole, surpassing every limit in order to reach the One who brings all things to fulfilment (115). In theology, which draws its principles from Revelation as a new source of knowledge, this perspective is confirmed by the intimate relationship which exists between faith and metaphysical reasoning. (§97)

What is this “philosophy of being based upon the act of being?” Affixed to the above text is note 115. The note refers to the Pope’s 1979 Angelicum address on the centenary of Leo XIII’s encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. In reiterating the Church’s tradition of recommending Aquinas, *Aeterni Patris* conferred a decisive impetus to the twentieth century revival of Thomism. The reference to the Angelicum address includes the following:

The philosophy of St. Thomas deserves to be attentively studied and accepted with conviction by the youth of our day by reason of its spirit of openness and of universalism, characteristics which are hard to find in many trends of contemporary thought. What is meant is an openness to the whole of reality in all its parts and dimensions, without either reducing reality or confining thought to particular forms or aspects (and without turning singular aspects into absolutes), as intelligence demands in the name of objective and integral truth about what is real. Such openness is also a significant and distinctive mark of the Christian faith, whose specific countermark is its catholicity. The basis and source of this openness lie in the fact that the philosophy of St. Thomas is a philosophy of being, that is, of the “act of existing” (*actus essendi*) whose transcendental value paves the most direct way to rise to the knowledge of subsisting Being and pure Act, namely to God. On account of this we can even call this philosophy: the philosophy of the proclamation of being, a chant in praise of what exists.¹¹

No doubt should exist that *Fides et Ratio* is referring to Aquinas’ central metaphysical notion of *actus essendi*. Elaborating on *actus essendi* as the most direct way to rise to the knowledge of God, section 6 of the Angelicum address continues.

... it is by reason of this affirmation of being that the philosophy of St. Thomas is able to, and indeed must, go beyond all that presents itself directly in knowledge as an existing thing (given through experience) in order to reach “that which subsists as sheer Existing” (*ipsum Esse subsistens*) and also creative Love; for it is this which provides the ultimate (and therefore necessary) explanation of the fact that “it is preferable to be than not to be” (*Potius est esse quam non esse*) and, in particular, of the fact that we exist. “This existing itself,” Aquinas tells

us, "is the most common effect of all, prior and more intimate than any other effect; that is why such an effect is due to a power that, of itself, belongs to God alone" (*ipsum enim esse est communissimus effectus, primus et intimior omnibus aliis effectibus; et ideo soli Deo competit secundum virtutem propriam talis effectus*: QQ. DD. *De Potentia*, q. 3, a. 7, c).¹²

Again, the Pope's concern with the specific Thomistic doctrine of *actus essendi*, or *esse*, is patent. Through this *actus essendi* understanding of what is meant by the existence of a thing, Aquinas' philosophy is so open to all of reality that the human intellect comes to know God.

Hence, of the various Thomistic camps in the twentieth century Thomistic revival, the Pope's clear preference is for the Existential Thomist camp. But from the encyclical itself, some objections to this specific Thomistic recommendation might be mounted. First, the Pope remarks, "The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others" (§ 49). Does this remark contradict the specific recommendation of Aquinas' *actus essendi* doctrine? Not necessarily. The remark does contradict the recommendation if the recommendation is treated as more than a recommendation. But by this first remark, the Pope makes it clear that the Church will never put its infallible seal of approval on any one particular philosophy. The wisdom of this approach is that the Church both encourages philosophers who may need encouragement and yet leaves philosophers free to disagree with each other. This approach assures that their mutual agreement will be attained by a particular doctrine making the philosophical case for itself.

Second, ". . . no historical form of philosophy can legitimately claim to embrace the totality of truth, nor to be the complete explanation of the human being, of the world, and of the human being's relationship with God" (§ 51). Why should this not include Thomism? And so how could the Pope recommend Thomism as the metaphysics that is universally and absolutely true? This second remark should not include Thomism for two reasons. First, as the previously cited Angelicum texts make clear, Aquinas' philosophy of *actus essendi* does not claim to embrace the totality of truth but to be "open" to all truth. Second, the "historical forms of philosophy" are secular philosophies that proceed with a deaf ear to the faith. Christian philosophy, of which Thomism is a model example, follows a methodology in which faith prompts one's thinking to the limits and so helps to avoid the limitedness of viewpoint and framework that is the bane of "historical," i.e., secular, forms of philosophy.

Third, the encyclical notes: ". . . the Magisterium has repeatedly

acclaimed the merits of Saint Thomas' thought and made him the guide and model for theological studies. This has not been in order to take a position on properly philosophical questions nor to demand adherence to particular theses," (§ 78) How can this remark square with the up-a-head recommendation (§ 97) of the *actus essendi* doctrine? Two points in reply. First, again, the *actus essendi* doctrine is being recommended only. There is no demanding adherence to it. Second, I want to note that this third remark is in the past tense. It describes what the Magisterium has done. But the next paragraph makes clear that the Pope intends to go beyond past recommending of Aquinas as a model for harmonizing faith and reason. With § 97 to follow, the Pope remarks, "Developing further what the Magisterium before me has taught, I intend in this final section to point out certain requirements which theology makes today of philosophical thinking and contemporary philosophies."

Hence, among encyclicals enjoining intellectuals to study Aquinas, *Fides et Ratio* stands out for one reason. Though singling out Aquinas for strong Papal endorsement, previous encyclicals hardly, if ever, singled out specific points of Thomistic doctrine. Rather, they confined themselves to offering Aquinas as a general model or an ideal case, of how Catholic intellectuals should strive to harmonize faith and reason. Intellectuals should try, to do "the kind" of thing that Aquinas did, though not necessarily what he did. Hence, proponents of Teilhard de Chardin and of Liberation Theology in their attempts to harmonize faith and science or faith and politics could all claim to be following the recommendations of the Church to do "the kind" of thing done so exemplarily by Aquinas. *Fides et Ratio* breaks the mould of these past Papal encyclicals. John Paul II recommends the study of a specific point of Thomist doctrine. His clear preference and recommendation is that the *actus essendi* discovery of twentieth century Thomistic scholarship and its development in Existential Thomism be not eclipsed from philosophical discussion at century's end. In this manner *Fides et Ratio* continues the Thomistic Revival into the twenty first century.

- 1 Speaking of classical realism, Gilson, an Existential Thomist, asks, "Is it so difficult, then, to understand that the concept of being is presented to knowledge as an intuitive perception since the being conceived is that of a sensible intuitively perceived? The existential acts which affect and impregnate the intellect through the senses are raised to the level of consciousness, and realist knowledge flows forth from this immediate contact between object and knowing subject." Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark A Wauck (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 206 and *passim*. Likewise, Maritain remarks, ". . . in the final reckoning, the primary basis for the veracity of our knowledge" is the "resolving of the sense's knowledge into the thing itself and actual existence." *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans by Gerald Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 118, n. 1, also

- Peasant*, 100; and Maritain's many remarks on his "intuition de l'être." For the Aristotelian Thomists (viz., the "River Forest" Dominicans—William Kane, Benedict Ashley, James Weisheipl, and William Wallace) the *a posteriori* origin of knowledge is reflected in the methodological primacy of natural philosophy (Aristotelian physics) over metaphysics. Natural philosophy has *ens mobile* as its subject, viz., sensible things as changeable. For a description of this neo-Thomist camp, see Benedict Ashley, "The River Forest School and the Philosophy of Nature Today," in *Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, ed. R. James Long (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991), 1–16.
- 2 On Aquinas' understanding of analogical conceptualization, see my "Aquinas, Analogy, and the Divine Infinity," *Doctor Communis*, 40 (1987), 71–6.
 - 3 See Ashley article cited *supra* n. 1
 - 4 For Gilson, vd., *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 63, 65, 67, 70; *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 5, 202, 214; *The Elements of Christian Philosophy* (New York: New American Library, 1963), 143. For Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. by L. Galantieri and G. B. Phelan (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), "The Concept of Existence or of To-exist (*esse*) and that of Being or of That-which-is (*ens*), 22–25.
 - 5 For the existential act understanding of being. "Sicut autem motus est actus ipsius mobilis inquantum mobile est; ita esse est actus existentis, inquantum ens est." (*In I Sent.*, d. 19, q. 2 a. 2c); esse dicitur actus entis in quantum est ens, idest quo denominatur aliquid ens actu in rerum natura." (*Quodl.* IX, q. 2, a. 3c); "Nam ens dicitur quasi esse habens..." (*In XII Meta.*, lect. 1). Also, *In I Sent.* d. 19, q 5, a 1c. *De Ver.*, I, 1, ad 3m, second set; *S.C.G II*, 54; *S.T. I* 44, 2c.
 - 6 For a sympathetic description with references, see Joseph Donceel, "Transcendental Thomism," *The Monist*, 58 (1974), 67–85. For a critical description with references, see my "Intellectual Dynamism in Transcendental Thomism: A Metaphysical Assessment," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 69 (1995), 15–28.
 - 7 "Whenever we think of a being, we can think of a greater being; in fact, we do so spontaneously, at least in this sense: that whenever we think of a being, we realize at once that this being is finite, limited. But — and this is a remark of utmost importance— *in order to know a limit as limit, we must, in fact or in our striving be beyond that limit.*" Joseph Donceel, *Natural Theology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), 20. Also 59 and 66.
 - 8 "This explains the great importance of 'retorsion' in Transcendental Thomism. 'Retorsion' is a technical term which refers to the method of demonstrating an assertion by showing that he who denies the assertion affirms it in his very denial." Donceel, "Transcendental Thomism," p. 81. For Maréchal's key exercise of retorsion, see Joseph Donceel, *A Maréchal Reader*. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 215–17, 227–8; for Karl Rahner, "Aquinas: The Notion of Truth" (*Continuum*, 2 (1964), 69; for Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, (New York: Longmans, 1965), 352 on being as unrestricted.
 - 9 See Knasas, "Intellectual Dynamism," pp. 23–25.
 - 10 Gerald McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), 257–9. *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), ch. 9 but esp 214–19.
 - 11 John Paul II, "Perennial Philosophy of St. Thomas for the Youth of Our Times," *Angelicum*, 57 (1980), 139–40.
 - 12 *Ibid.* pp. 140–1.