

I. Belief and Metaphysics

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I shall use the term belief in the religious sense, as an equivalent of faith, even though belief has a more cognitive connotation than faith, which includes trust and confidence. A second preliminary principle concerns the relation between religious belief and theology. To be comparable with or related to metaphysics, religious belief needs to be at least minimally interpreted and justified. The believer must have some notion of what it implies and ought to conceive of it as logically coherent. All of this requires some theological interpretation. Hence, in the following discussion I shall focus on faith as raised to the level of theological reflection.

The Unity of Theology and Metaphysics in the Past and their Separation in the Modern Age

When Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* reduced philosophy to epistemology he not only eliminated metaphysics from its scope but theology as well. As he stated in the Introduction, he intended to leave to faith what previously had belonged to science. Already Descartes had separated philosophy from any kind of theological speculation. In a letter concerning the dogma of the Eucharistic presence, he wrote: 'I abstain as far as I can from questions of theology'.¹ In this respect the father of modern philosophy merely drew the conclusions from late medieval, nominalist theology,

¹ *Oeuvres*, ed. Adam & Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1964), Vol. IV, pp. 162–70.

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which had sharply distinguished the natural order of things, to which philosophy belonged, from the supernatural one dealt with in theology. God's transcendence and unrestricted power excluded any possibility of predicting or understanding his ways with creation. The present world order was the outcome of a divine decree that had no intrinsic necessity and could be changed as arbitrarily as it had been initiated. Theology had to rely entirely on revelation and received no more than logical support from philosophy.

1 In high scholasticism no such separation between philosophy and theology had existed. Aquinas had called his synthesis of revelation with Aristotelian, Neoplatonic and Arabian philosophy *Summa Theologiae*. He had distinguished 'natural' virtues from supernatural ones and had even recognized a natural end to the person, which he described in Aristotelian and Stoic terms. But 'natural' virtue is incomplete and the 'natural' end of human beings remains subordinate to the more comprehensive, supernatural one. Yet this distinction between the natural and the supernatural is purely functional. Taken by itself the 'natural' is an abstraction. The great Franciscan teachers Bonaventure and Scotus integrated the two orders of discourse even more intimately.

2 For the ancient philosophers, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, distinction between natural and supernatural had, of course, not existed. We may nevertheless compare the continuity between the human and the divine order as conceived by those pre-Christian philosophers with the one that prevailed in the Greek fathers and the scholastics. For Plato and Plotinus, the erotic drive of thought originates in an attraction derived from a transcendental source. Aristotle in *De anima* describes the active principle of the human intellect as divine. In order to think, he argues, the mind needs the impulse of a principle that has never ceased thinking. This can only be divine. Indeed, the soul itself, once freed from the passivity of the body, will become divinized. In the tenth Book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes contemplation, the goal of philosophy, as a properly divine activity. Beyond the internal dialogue that the mind entertains with itself, it aims at an intuitive state, which reasoning merely prepares. Again, he insists that such

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a state surpasses human capacity. The person attains it only 'insofar as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature, its activity is superior to the exercise of the other kind of virtue. If reason is divine in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life.' (*Nic. Ethics*, X, 7, 5 (1177B))

3 The highest state of consciousness, then, for classical philosophers as well as for Christian thinkers of the High Middle Ages, implied some kind of divine communication with human nature. The very possibility of communicating with God arouses a 'natural' desire for God. Yet the alleged object of this desire, the *religious* idea of God, originates neither in philosophy nor in any other natural mode of cognition, but in a divine *revelation*. Philosophy merely encounters this idea, which precedes philosophical reflection. But then the problem occurs: How can we speak of a 'natural' desire for a 'revealed' idea?

(a) If philosophy ought to be an autonomous science that tolerates no interference from other sources, as modern thinkers have increasingly emphasized, a revealed idea of God should have no place in philosophy. At most, philosophy may admit some notion of transcendence. The religious idea of God, derived from a pre-philosophical source, appeared perfectly acceptable to pre-modern thinkers, who distinguished the natural from the supernatural but did not separate them. In the *Summa contra gentiles* Aquinas argues that each being seeks to achieve the fullness of its nature. Thus a spiritual being naturally desires the divine qualities of goodness and truth but its limited capacity prohibits it from ever fully attaining them. The desire, then, Thomas concludes, is natural, but its full realization surpasses natural human power.

(b) One might think that Platonic philosophy makes a similar claim. But the object of Platonic desire differs from Aquinas's supernatural object. Plato's idea of the Good, as well as Aristotle's Unmoved Mover and Plotinus' One attract the mind, not because they have been *revealed*, or because they intend to attract. The object of the desire they evoke remains wholly indifferent to that desire. The Good or the One entertains no active relation to our world – nor has it freely created that world.

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(c) Modern thought finds it exceedingly difficult to conceive of a natural desire for a revealed and hence supernatural Absolute. Both philosophical and theological reasons prevent it from doing so. Philosophy tolerates no interference from non-philosophical sources. The resistance is equally strong in modern theology, which has separated nature and the supernatural. If the notion of a natural desire of God nevertheless occurs in such modern philosophers as Nicholas Malebranche or in the Cambridge Platonists, it could do so only because these authors ignored the restrictions of modern philosophy as well as those of a theology influenced by nominalism. With Kant these restrictions became even tighter: not only would revealed concepts not be admitted into philosophy (unless previously converted into philosophical ones) but metaphysics itself, which made the communication possible, was exorcized from critical philosophy.

The Way to Reunion

I On this last point three of Kant's wayward followers disagreed and with them begins a new attempt to reintroduce religious and even revealed ideas into philosophy. J. G. Fichte attacked what he considered an inconsistency of his master who, on the one hand, denied the possibility of an intellectual intuition (the basic condition of metaphysics) and, on the other, grounded his ethical theory in the intuition of an absolute ethical imperative. Schelling shared Fichte's concern, and, in addition, objected to Kant's position that the mind has no intuitive knowledge of nature. Both idealists re-established the legitimacy of metaphysics. Yet they all the more strongly stressed the autonomy of philosophy. They did not formally exclude divine revelation from philosophy, but they submitted the concept of revelation to such stringent philosophical conditions that they practically transformed it into an intrinsically philosophical one.

Hegel may have come closest to recognizing revealed faith on its own terms. He claimed to have derived the entire content of his philosophy from Christian faith. Yet that faith, he argued, does not attain full self-understanding until it has transferred to *thought* what religion merely *represents*. His position may appear to apply

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Augustine's rule that faith must seek understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). For Hegel, however, philosophy does not merely reflect on faith: he transposes its content into a different mode of consciousness. It thereby loses its receptive capacity altogether and returns philosophy to its purely autonomous status.

2 None of the proposed attempts, then, to reunite metaphysics with religious belief while preserving each one's identity succeeded. In the twentieth century two developments changed the situation. First, the birth of phenomenology, especially after it developed into the hermeneutic philosophies of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur. The issue was no longer whether metaphysics could incorporate faith or be incorporated by it. Phenomenologists remained acutely aware of the methodological limits of philosophy. Yet they felt that the Kantian rules unduly restricted philosophy's ability to fulfil its proper task, namely, a systematic, yet comprehensive search of meaning. In his *Critique*, Kant had limited the field of meaning to a justification of morality, aesthetics and the natural sciences. But all these sciences raise more general and more fundamental questions which philosophy ought to address.

Metaphysics investigates the meaning-giving fact on which all meanings depend, namely the self-disclosure of Being. This must be done through an analysis of human existence in which Being reveals itself. Metaphysics, then, has as its task to investigate all forms of meaning, including the one of religion, which opens a unique problem. Unlike the positive sciences or even, in a different way, ethics and aesthetics, religion can claim no incontrovertible empirical certainties. To be sure, Christian faith may refer to the historical, established facts of its origin. But, as Lessing had objected, how reliable are alleged facts recorded centuries before historical critique had fully developed?

To be sure, the hermeneutical principle that fact and interpretation are indissolubly united definitely applies in religious matters, where all 'facts' carry a symbolic meaning. But what are the facts of the Christian faith? Kierkegaard, a committed Christian believer, once wrote that historically they amount to a footnote: during the reign of Emperor Tiberius a Jew in Palestine died for his religious beliefs and on the basis of his deeds and doctrine was believed to be divine. All the rest is interpretation. But how far can

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we stretch religious interpretation without breaking the meaning altogether? More importantly, do those facts justify the transcendent significance faith attaches to them? Even if I accept Christ's resurrection as a proven fact, why should that affect my entire philosophical outlook?

The author of a recent essay on 'Philosophy and Theology' suggests a possible answer to these questions in Paul Ricoeur's late philosophy.² The Christian philosopher ought to treat the content of faith as a hypothesis and then investigate how much this hypothesis contributes to a deeper understanding of human existence. Of course, this approach does not disclose the ultimate meaning of faith. Religious mysteries furnish conceptual paradigms to philosophy. Philosophy does not try to 'prove' them. Metaphysics belongs to a different kind of intelligibility than the discourse of religion. Above all, metaphysics does not attempt to demonstrate their truth, because they have nothing to do with demonstrations.³ But at least such a *Daseinsanalyse* forces metaphysics to take religious belief seriously.

Once the question of meaning is raised at an existential level, the epistemic difference that distinguishes modern philosophy from theology ceases to be a prohibitive separation. Hermeneutic philosophy is open to any source of existential meaning. To the believer, faith is the most fundamental source of meaning: he or she must adopt it within the metaphysical quest of meaning. Since this source is not available to the non-believer, it stands in need of a particularly critical examination. Even the non-believer is not qualified a priori to rule out a source of meaning which he or she does not know from within. The believing philosopher cannot dispense with a critical examination of his faith. Yet once he or she has successfully accomplished this task, it cannot but constitute a primary factor of existential meaning.

3 Yet another innovation in contemporary philosophy has reopened the road to belief. During the first half of the twentieth

² James Pambrun, 'The Relationship Between Theology and Philosophy: Augustine, Ricoeur and Hermeneutics', *Theoforum* 36.3 (2005), pp. 293-319.

³ Miklos Vetö: 'Jalons et moments', *Iris: Annales de philosophie* 27 (2006), pp. 1-11 (quote on p. 11).

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century a few French and Belgian philosophers steered Thomist philosophy in a new direction. Pierre Rousselot, a French Jesuit killed in World War One, argued that an intellectual dynamism moves the cognitive act beyond its immediate objects toward a transcendent goal. It implicitly co-affirms this goal, even though its nature lies beyond our cognitive capacity. In a celebrated dissertation published in 1893 entitled *L'Action*, Maurice Blondel argued that all human acting implies a transcendent goal. All human acting receives its impulse from a fundamental desire that surpasses the immediate object of choice. The motive of my acting moves well beyond its actual and even its possible achievements. Will this self-transcending aspiration ever be fulfilled? To this question philosophy shows at least the openness to a transcendent response, if this ultimate goal were ever to reveal itself.

Joseph Maréchal, professor at the Philosophical Faculty of the Belgian Jesuits in Louvain, completed the work of these predecessors in a masterly five-volume reinterpretation of Western epistemology and, indeed, of Thomist metaphysics in its entirety. With Kant, whose influence continues to dominate his work, he excludes the possibility of an intellectual intuition. Yet he shows that a number of Western philosophers have recognized an *implicit* intuition of the absolute in the self-surpassing drive of all thinking. The intuition remains implicit, because it conveys no metaphysical 'knowledge' of God. Still the active *presence* of transcendence within the act exceeds Kant's reductionist analysis of religion.

Transcendental Thomism has from the beginning provoked much controversy. Can a medieval system ever be integrated with Kantian philosophy? Even if Maréchal presents a valid reinterpretation of metaphysics, as I believe he does, the distance between actual faith and intellectual dynamism remains considerable, apparently greater than in the hermeneutic philosophy we have just discussed. In comparing the two, however, we must not forget that precisely the theory of intellectual dynamism creates a necessary condition for hermeneutic philosophy to be existentially meaningful. Without an ontological desire in thinking and acting, the possibility of existential meaning derived from a transcendent source, remains unintelligible. Gabriel Marcel has shown the riches of meaning to be drawn from the theory of transcendental desire.

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Does Faith needs Metaphysics?

1 So far we have discussed how transcendental philosophy and hermeneutic thought may have opened a new way toward integrating transcendent meaning with a metaphysics of Being. But does religious faith need metaphysics? We know that one of the important theologians of the past century, Karl Barth, vehemently denies this. According to his *Church Dogmatics*, any attempt to mediate biblical revelation through metaphysics corrupts the divine message. Like a meteor fallen from heaven Christ touches this world at one tangential point. His revelation needs no philosophical support, nor does it fit our categories of thinking. The Christian message cannot even be ranked under the general concept of religion.

Against this position I hold, with most theologians, that a faith conceived in human ideas, expressed in human words, requires some *praeparatio fidei*, to be received, cultivated and practised. As Romano Guardini describes the process, we must first *see* something and then risk the plunge. *Etwas sehen und es dann wagen*. Metaphysics leads us to that insight in the human condition, where alone the need for transcendent meaning can be felt.

2 Yet metaphysics must be more than a *praeparatio fidei*. In concluding the volume on modern metaphysics of his monumental *The Glory of the Lord*, Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote:

A Christian has to conduct philosophical enquiry on account of his faith. Believing in the absolute love of God for the world, he is obliged to understand Being in its ontological difference as pointing to love, and to live in accordance with this indication . . . The mystery that anything exists at all becomes for him yet more profound and in the most comprehensive sense more worthy of enquiry than it does for any other kind of philosopher.⁴

For the believer, the ontological difference consists in the insight that Being possesses no intrinsic necessity as it did in ancient

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*. Vol. V: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Rowan Williams, et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 646.

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thought, when the cosmos and the gods possessed an equal necessity. The believer experiences Being as a gift.

This means more than that God created all things. To claim that, since God created all things, God created Being evades the fundamental metaphysical question: Why is there something rather than nothing? It merely raises the further question: And what about God? Is God not Being? Heidegger repeated Leibniz's question in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935). He continued to struggle with it for years and finally, in the *Letter on Humanism* (1949), repeated what all philosophers since Kant had claimed, namely, that philosophy is incapable of adequately dealing with the idea of God.

Still, faith requires some insight in this metaphysical question to understand the mystery of creation. In my view, there is only one way to reconcile the scholastic position that God is Being – *esse substantiale subsistens*, as St Thomas defines divine Being – with the notion of creation, namely, in positing that all created things exist in God, as all beings are *in* Being. Heidegger himself tentatively suggested a somewhat related analogy in a 1960 meeting with theologians: philosophy is related to Being as theology is related to God.⁵ Creation, then, would consist in an unfolding of divine Being, as Nicolas of Cusa had argued in the fifteenth century. God thereby becomes the very Being of all beings, distinct from them by nothing but their finitude.

This pantheistic position differs from the pantheistic one that God is the sum total of all beings. First, because God in Christian theology is discussed as *substantial* Being, which means that God, while including all beings within the divine Being, transcends them. This presupposes that the relation between Being and all beings be conceived as a dynamic, unfolding of Being, a process which monotheist theology calls *creation*. Precisely this dynamic aspect of creation distinguishes Cusanus' metaphysics from Spinoza's static one, in which God is the *substance* of all things. Scholastic metaphysics, inspired by Neoplatonism, was particularly well-equipped for expressing the self-communication of Being represented by the mystery of creation. The adage *bonum est divisum sui* supported the mysterious description of the First

⁵ James N. Robinson, 'The German Discussion' in *The Later Heidegger and Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 43.

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Epistle of John, that God is *Love*, which I would translate as goodness that communicates itself.

3 If God is Love, we understand that all God's manifestations, all created beings, are gratuitous, not intrinsically necessary, yet freely dispensed as a gift. This still does not exhaust the meaning of the Christian belief that *Being* itself is a gift. How can the Giver also be gift? What the Creator gives is nothing but himself: God is the very Being of all beings. To this metaphysical truth, indispensable to faith for understanding its own mystery, theology has added yet another one, which deepens metaphysics' own insight. In the mystery of the blessed Trinity, inscrutable to philosophy yet completing its self-understanding, the relation of *fides quaerens intellectum* reverses itself into the equally Augustinian *intellectus quaerens fidem*.

Balthasar, then, has rightly called the Christian the guardian of that metaphysical wonderment in which philosophy originates.⁶ Religious believers deepen their faith through metaphysics, while at the same time keeping the metaphysical flame alive. During two and a half centuries of Western philosophy, the wonderment before the religious mystery has stimulated metaphysical thought, from Parmenides to Plato and Plotinus; from Augustine to Aquinas and Scotus, from Nicolas of Cusa to Leibniz and Hegel.

The forgetfulness of Being denounced by Heidegger is, not coincidentally, accompanied by a forgetfulness of God. Metaphysics has risen from mythology and religion. Without a religious sense of wonder the philosopher is rarely inclined to raise the question of Being in its totality, against the horizon of nothingness. In an essay 'On a Certain Blindness', William James identified the lack of perceptiveness for the significance of things as one of the principal shortcomings of our time.⁷ We have lost our ability for being surprised by their *being there*. Today it is among poets, rather than philosophers, that we most commonly find the sense of wonder from which metaphysics springs.

⁶ von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, Vol. V, p. 656.

⁷ William James, 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings', originally published in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1899); republished in *Writings, 1878-1899*, ed. Gerald Myers (New York: Library of America, 1992), pp. 841-60.