Natural Theology and the Christian Contribution to Metaphysics: On Thomas Joseph White's *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*

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From the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith, Manuel II was able to say: Not to act "with logos" is contrary to God's nature. . . . [T]he faith of the Church has always insisted that between God and us, between his eternal Creator Spirit and our created reason there exists a real analogy, in which unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness, yet not to the point of abolishing analogy and its language (cf. Lateran IV). God does not become more divine when we push him away from us in a sheer, impenetrable voluntarism; rather, the truly divine God is the God who has revealed himself as logos and, as logos, has acted and continues to act lovingly on our behalf. . . . This inner rapprochement between biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history—it is an event which concerns us even today.[1]

It is my view that the neoscholastic rationalism that was trying to reconstruct the *praeambula fidei,* the approach to faith, with pure rational certainty, by means of rational argument that was strictly independent of any faith, has failed; and it cannot be otherwise for any such attempts to do that kind of thing.[2]

THE QUESTION of the relationship between Greek philosophical wisdom and biblical revelation, which culminates in the incarnate Word, is both ancient and perennial. "If those who are called philosophers,"

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[1] Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," Address to the University of Regensburg (September 12, 2006).

[2] Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 136.

writes Augustine, "and especially the Platonists, have said things that are indeed true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from them, but to claim them for our own use."[3] In the eyes of Augustine, the most important truth discovered by Greek philosophy is the knowledge of God: "there are philosophers who have conceived of God, the supreme and true God, . . . and who have recognized him as being for us the origin of existence."[4] In his book *Introduction to Christianity* (1968), Joseph Ratzinger describes and defends what he calls "the decision of the early Church in favor of philosophy."

> Wherever the question arose as to which god the Christian God corresponded, Zeus perhaps or Hermes or Dionysius or some other god, the answer ran: To none of them. To none of the gods to whom you pray but solely and alone . . . to that highest being of whom your philosophers speak. . . . When we say God . . . we mean only Being itself, what the philosophers have expounded as the ground of all being, as the God above all powers—that alone is our God.[5]

The reason for this "decision in favor of philosophy" is rooted both in Christianity's claim to be true and in the comprehensiveness or catholicity of Christ's redeeming work. The life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is not a myth, but the revelation of God's Logos and, as such, the key to the meaning of reality as a whole. As we are told in the Letter to the Colossians, "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (1:17).

The Church's reception of God's revelation in Jesus Christ entailed a double affirmation: in the first place there was an acknowledgment of having received a new and higher wisdom—the folly of the Cross—that surpasses and in some sense overturns the philosophical wisdom of the Greeks (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–25). Secondly, there was a growing recognition that the gift of revelation presupposes and brings to fulfillment a human being's natural capacity to know God, a capacity evidenced in the teaching of Plato and Aristotle.

Why is this second affirmation essential to the integrity of the Gospel, and what is the relationship between these two affirmations? The key to answering both of these questions is the unity of creation and redemption within God's plan to recapitulate all things in Christ. The new gift

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[3] Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, II, 40.

[4] Augustine, *Civitas Dei*, VIII, 10.

[5] Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 137–38 (*Einführung in das Christentum* [Munich: Kösel, 2005], 127).

of grace presupposes and brings to fulfillment the nature and purpose of creation. As Hans Urs von Balthasar avers, in the spirit of Irenaeus, "a redeemer who does not justify the creator has not truly redeemed anything."[6] The archetype of grace presupposing and perfecting nature is the hypostatic union of God and man in Jesus Christ. The incarnate Son reveals the truth of God and the truth of human nature without confusion or separation. One of the ways in which Jesus Christ reveals the full truth of human nature is that he presupposes it. In the event of the Incarnation, he respects with divine care the terms of the Father's gift of creation, including the natural integrity and the natural capacities of human reason.

The scholastic axiom *gratia praesupponit et perficit naturam*[7] is an inner requirement of the doctrine of the Incarnation, which in turn safeguards the unity and the distinction of creation and redemption. This is the reason why von Balthasar, responding to Karl Barth's criticism of natural theology, was able to discern an authentic (i.e., Chalcedonian) Christocentrism in Vatican I's declaration that "holy mother Church holds and teaches that God, the source and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason."[8] It is simply not possible for the Church to bear witness to the whole mystery of Jesus Christ without presupposing and taking responsibility for human nature and the vocation of human beings to seek God through his created effects. Christian theology needs philosophy, especially a form of philosophical contemplation that, with Plato and Aristotle, desires to know the whole of reality in light of its ultimate cause.

Thomas Joseph White's *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity: A Study in Thomistic Natural Theology*[9] is a promising sign of the renewed interest in metaphysics and natural theology within contemporary Catholic thought. In light of the scope of the book's argument, its careful exposition of Aristotelian and Thomistic principles and texts, its engagement with currents of modern philosophy as well as a range of contemporary Thomists, and, above all, in light of Fr. White's patient but determined confidence that reason comes from God and is capable of demonstrative

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[6] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. VII, *Theology: The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 523.

[7] For an account of the background and significance of this axiom in medieval thought, especially the theology of Bonaventure, see Joseph Ratzinger, "Gratia praesupponit naturam. Erwägungen über Sinn und Grenze eines scholastischen Axioms," in *Einsicht und Glaube: Festschrift für Gottlieb Söhngen zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. J. Ratzinger and H. Fries (Freiburg: Herder, 1962), 135–49.

[8] Vatican I, *Dei Filius*, 2.

[9] (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009).

knowledge of God, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity* will help to encourage and guide a rediscovery of natural theology as integral to Catholic thought and Catholic education. As White correctly discerns, at issue in the question of analogy, or natural knowledge of God through his created effects, is not simply the role of philosophy within Catholic thought, but the meaning or logos of creation as a whole as well as the human being's capacity for truth.

The argument of the book unfolds on two inter-related levels. The initial context is a defense of natural knowledge of God in response to the philosophical objections of Kant and Heidegger and to the theological objections epitomized by Karl Barth and Luther. The second level of the argument concerns the interpretation of the thought of Thomas Aquinas; more precisely, White's aim is to develop a Thomistic philosophical order of discovery or *via inventionis* in continuity with Aristotle's causal metaphysics. Most of the book's structure and content is preoccupied with this second concern. As Alasdair MacIntyre suggests (in his paragraph on the back cover), this is a book "within and about Thomism." Perhaps the most fundamental concern of the book is to establish and elucidate the profound continuity and harmony between the causal metaphysics of Aristotle and the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. Underlying the careful criticisms of other interpreters of Aquinas, such as Garrigou-Lagrange, Gilson, Maritain, Rahner, and Denys Turner (to mention only some of the figures discussed by White) is the claim that each of these authors has neglected an important aspect of the Aristotelian inheritance that structures St. Thomas's doctrine of being.

In light of the abundance of authors and themes discussed in the book, it seems worthwhile to focus attention on the unifying concern of White to depict and recommend an " 'Aristotelian' view of Aquinas."[10] Accordingly, I will, in Part I, rehearse White's main argument in the context of a question that has emerged within contemporary Thomism. Following this brief summary of the book, I will, in Parts II and III, frame two sets of questions that touch on Aquinas's relation to Aristotle: Part II considers the non-Aristotelian provenance of the important Thomistic axiom "*actus non limitatur nisi per potentiam*"; Part III takes up the debate over the concept of "Christian philosophy" in light of John Paul II's teaching in *Fides et Ratio*. It should become clear that while I agree with White in affirming natural reason's capacity to know God, his further project of interpreting Thomistic natural theology in terms of a mode of causal

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[10] White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*, 225, n. 49; hereafter, references to the book are provided parenthetically.

analysis that is wholly and exclusively a matter of a posteriori demonstration is open to serious philosophical and theological objections.

I. The Argument—Aristotelian Causal Analysis and St. Thomas's Real Distinction

The book is structured into four parts and eight chapters. Part One sets the stage by identifying the contemporary challenge to natural theology and by introducing some of the requirements for an adequate response based on the thought of Aristotle and Thomas:

> [T]he chief consideration of this book is the right articulation of an appropriate way of progressive discovery for Thomistic metaphysics in the wake of the Kantian and Heideggerian accusations that all natural theology amounts to ontotheology. . . Precisely because it eschews any systematic schema of all beings, including divine being, based upon aprioristic conditions for understanding, Thomistic metaphysics falls outside the scope of the criticisms of Kant and Heidegger. (28–29)

There are two points to notice in this summary account of the book's purpose. First, here and throughout the book, White correlates the Kantian and Heideggerian accusation of ontotheology with a priori knowledge of God.[11] Accordingly, and this is the second point, White suggests that the key to circumventing the problem of ontotheology is to develop a mode of analysis or demonstration that is exclusively a posteriori.[12]

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[11] For example, "is true natural knowledge of God possible that does not in fact presuppose its object a priori? Is there such a thing as a 'natural theology' that is not 'ontotheological' in the senses given that word by Kant and Heidegger?" (xxvii); "this reflection upon natural theology avoids the difficulties of undue aprioristic claims to knowledge of God, thereby circumventing the Kantian and subsequently by Heideggerian criticisms of ontotheology" (xxxii); "[According to Kant and Heidegger] natural theology is inevitably ontotheological because it attempts to study the conditions of existence for any possible being. To do so it must have recourse to a consideration of the immanent laws of human systematic thinking (i.e. principles of causality and sufficient reason) that are employed when metaphysicians attempt to explain sensible reality. The use of these principles eventually requires (or invites) the invocation of an aprioristic concept of God" (96–97; cf. 201); "This account does not commit one to any kind of pre-theoretical, conceptual understanding or intuition of God, and is not aprioristic in nature. It does not possess, therefore, the essential characteristics of ontotheological reasoning" (249–50).

[12] It is outside the scope of this essay to challenge White's interpretation of Heidegger, but it is perhaps worth noting that Heidegger's critique of the ontotheological constitution of metaphysics is not concerned simply with a priori knowledge of God. For Heidegger, any form of thinking about a transcendent cause of beings (*Seienden*) or being (*Sein*), whether a priori or a posteriori, entails a forgetfulness

"Truly philosophical approaches to God," he writes, "are not based upon aprioristic conceptions of the divine, but upon a posteriori argumentation" (202). And, "The primary claim of this book has been that there is a natural knowledge of God accessible to human persons that is not based either upon aprioristic philosophical conceptions of God, nor upon aprioristic commitments of Christian faith" (252).

Instead of a priori knowledge, White seeks to show how we can progress "from an initial analogical knowledge of the beings we experience to an eventual, indirect, and analogical knowledge of the Creator" (xxix). In the words of St. Thomas, *sapientis est ordinare*. The task that White undertakes is to establish the proper order of philosophical discovery, that is, to show how metaphysics begins, and then to outline the requisite steps that allow one to proceed from an analysis of substance and accidents / act and potency toward a knowledge of the real distinction between *esse* and essence, and, finally, toward knowledge of God. The resources for this progressive analysis of our experience of beings toward indirect and analogical knowledge of God are found in the causal metaphysics of Aristotle as interpreted and developed by Aquinas. The project of developing a Thomistic philosophical order of discovery (*via inventionis*) is complicated by debates within contemporary Thomism regarding the status of philosophy in Aquinas's writings and by an older quarrel concerning the relationship among various forms of analogy utilized by St. Thomas (analogy of proper proportionality, analogy *multa ad unum*—from the many to the one, and analogy *ad alterum*—toward the other).[13]

Part Two consists of two chapters devoted to the theme of knowledge of God as wisdom, in Aristotle and in Aquinas, respectively. These chapters are perhaps the strongest part of the book. White demonstrates an impressive grasp of the corpus of both authors, the historical settings for their work, and the current state of the question in Aristotelian studies and Thomism. In each of the two chapters, White introduces the key elements that will be gathered into a synthesis later in the book: Aristotle's reinterpretation of the Platonic good in terms of final cause, the idea

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of the difference between being and beings. There is something odd in White's suggestion that he has shown a path for knowledge of God that "circumvents" (or that is "immune to") Heidegger's critique of ontotheology *precisely because* this path is wholly a posteriori.

[13] Bernard Montagnes provides a helpful overview of the idea of analogy as well as the history of interpretation from St. Thomas to Cajetan in *The Doctrine of the Analogy of Being According to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press: 2004); also helpful is Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

of substance, the primacy of actuality over potency, St. Thomas's under-
standing of the subject of metaphysics, the real distinction between *esse*
and essence, the distinction between "first act" and personal operations,
and the differentiation of the three forms of analogy mentioned above.

Before presenting a synthetic account of Aristotelian and Thomistic
philosophical order, White turns, in Part Three, to examine three repre-
sentative conceptions of St. Thomas's doctrine of being and analogical
predication. Individual chapters are devoted to the thought of Étienne
Gilson, Jacques Maritain, and Karl Rahner. The aim here is to show how
each of these authors contributes to an understanding of some aspect of
Thomistic natural theology, but in a partial or imbalanced way—Gilson's
writings provide insight into the metaphysics of *esse* and the *ad alterum*
analogy; Maritain's thought sheds light on the importance of the tran-
scendentals and the analogy of proper proportionality; Rahner highlights
the significance of personal spiritual operations and the *multa ad unum*
analogy. On White's reading, the partiality or imbalance in each of these
authors stems from their having neglected an important aspect of
Aquinas's Aristotelian inheritance:

> Each neglects in some fashion important dimensions of Aquinas's causal
> metaphysics. Correspondingly, each makes use of one of the three
> forms of analogical predication from Aquinas in ways that discriminate
> unnecessarily against the other two. For Gilson, a theologically inspired
> metaphysical doctrine of creation is substituted, in some respects, for an
> Aristotelian analysis of causes, and this leads to an exclusive emphasis
> on the *ad alterum* analogical thought of Aquinas. This usage threatens to
> impose a Christian theology of creation upon the metaphysical study
> of being, such that all secondary beings are conceived from the begin-
> ning of metaphysics as participated *esse* in relation to a primary notion
> of unparticipated, pure *esse*. For Maritain, the idea of an "intuition of
> being" yields transcendental notions that substitute for a causal analysis
> of being. This leads to an exclusive use of the analogy of proper propor-
> tionality. . . . This usage threatens to found a notion of the divine within
> a quasi-univocal understanding of being, attributed to accidents, to
> substance, and to the divine being in proportionally analogical ways.
> The passage to predication of attributes to God is based no longer on
> a causal demonstration of the Creator, but on a logical extension of
> concepts. For Rahner, an aprioristic "pre-apprehension" of the infinite
> *esse* of God acts as a kind of substitute for an a posteriori causal demon-
> stration of God's existence. This leads to an exclusive use of the *multa
> ad unum* analogy, which in turn threatens to engulf God and creatures
> within a common science of transcendentals. (99–100)

After reflecting on the shortcomings of Gilson, Maritain, and Rahner, White moves, in Part Four, to a constructive account of Thomistic philosophical order. Chapter seven, which is the centerpiece of the book, is titled "From Omega to Alpha: Toward a General Order of Metaphysical Inquiry." The aim of this chapter is to outline and unfold the key steps that mark the beginning of metaphysics and the passage from "a consideration of the intrinsic formal cause of being (as actuality) to the eventual affirmation of God who is subsistent being-in-act" (202). Central to White's overall argument is the idea that, in order to avoid ontotheology or aprioristic conceptions of God, it is necessary to patiently study the intrinsic formal causes of the concrete beings that we experience before progressing to a study of God as the transcendent cause of all that exists. I will say more about the content of this chapter below.

The concluding eighth chapter, "*Analogia Sapientiae*," which has the feel of a postscript, takes issue with a strand of contemporary Thomism that White judges to be excessively apophatic. Here White argues that "the knowledge offered by natural theological reasoning makes use of the *via negationis*, or negative way, primarily as a means of acknowledging God's transcendence and perfection, and that this procedure ultimately leads in fact to a positive form of knowledge" (xxxii). At the same time this "positive knowledge" is intrinsically imperfect and, as such, open to the possibility of divine revelation.

In order to appreciate the argument and the architectonics of *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*, it is helpful to consider an aporia or difficulty bequeathed by Thomas Aquinas. The difficulty stems from the fact that whereas St. Thomas clearly distinguished between philosophy and theology, and just as clearly affirmed the legitimacy of philosophical reflection, he did not elaborate a philosophical order of inquiry or *via inventionis*. He did not, in other words, compose a *Summa philosophiae*. White explains the difficulty as follows:

> Aquinas himself did not seek to present a purely philosophical order of discovery, or *via inventionis*, even for many of the metaphysical principles that he invokes within the context of his Christian theological writings. A modern development of a Thomistic natural theology requires, then, an interpretation concerning the distinctly philosophical characteristics of Aquinas's metaphysics and their order of exposition. (xxix)
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> [Aquinas's metaphysical doctrines] are articulated within a medieval cultural context in which a distinctly theological mode of investigation prevails; it is no secret that Aquinas does not give us a specifically philosophical *via inventionis* for many of his key metaphysical affirmations. (This arguably is the case even for the *esse*/essence distinction, which

was articulated within the context of a Christian theological study of creation.) Much of Aquinas's metaphysics, therefore, is developed, as Norman Kretzmann has stated, from the top down: in reflecting on creation as seen in light of its relation to God the Creator. (98)

The absence of a distinct philosophical order of exposition in the major writings of St. Thomas has generated different conclusions within contemporary Thomism. Mark Jordan, for example, suggests that it is unbefitting for a Christian (or at least a Christian who would be faithful to the thought of St. Thomas) to develop a philosophical order of exposition:

> Aquinas chose not to write philosophy. He did so partly because of other choices that he made—for example, to become a Dominican and a Master of Theology. . . Aquinas's decision to write as a theologian when he wrote in his own voice was chiefly the result of his view that no Christian should be satisfied to speak only as a philosopher.[14]

A quite different conclusion is drawn by members of the River Forest School of interpretation, who suggest that Thomas did not elaborate a philosophical order because his philosophy, as distinct from his theology, is the philosophy of Aristotle. Ralph McInerny articulates this view:

> There are two possible explanations of this presence of Aristotelianism: either Thomas adopted the principles and procedures of philosophy as taught by Aristotle because he thought they were true, or he had a different conception of philosophy than Aristotle's into which he was able to assimilate Aristotelian tenets as well as others. In favor of the second alternative is the fact that Thomas also exhibited sympathy for Platonic teachings. Must there not, then, be a larger whole, a specifically Thomistic philosophy, into which both Platonic and Aristotelian elements fit to the degree that they are in accord with its principles? I will endeavor to show that the first alternative is the correct one. The second has plausibility because Thomas did indeed advance the Aristotelian program beyond Aristotle and showed the kind of hospitality to Neoplatonism mentioned. But this, I would argue, was done in terms of a philosophical outlook that is fundamentally Aristotelian. Moreover, there are no peculiarly Thomistic philosophical principles that could supplant the Aristotelian ones he adopts.[15]

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[14] Mark D. Jordan, "Theology and Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump ([Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 232-51, at 233. See also Jordan, *Ordering Wisdom: The Hierarchy of Philosophical Discourses in Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

[15] Ralph McInerny, *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 160.

On this reading, the task of presenting a "specifically Thomistic" philosophical order of discovery is misguided from the outset. Hence the first "thesis" of the River Forest School, "the philosophy of Aquinas, as distinct from his theology, is best gathered . . . from the commentaries on Aristotle."[16]

Where does Fr. White stand relative to this question within Thomism regarding the philosophy of St. Thomas? In many respects, White's position is very close to that of McInerny. He describes *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity* as "a sketch of Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle's metaphysics (or perhaps, inversely, an Aristotelian sketch of Aquinas's ontology)," and directs the reader to McInerny's *Praeambula Fidei* "[f]or a similar 'Aristotelian' view of Aquinas" (225). "I treat Aquinas," he writes, "primarily as an Aristotelian" (xxxii). The core argument of White's book is that Aristotle's causal metaphysics provides the indispensable foundation for a Thomistic approach to analogical knowledge of God. However, there are significant differences between White's proposal and that of the River Forest School. Most importantly, White presents a compelling argument against the position of Benedict Ashley and Ralph McInerny that Thomistic *separatio*, which establishes the subject of metaphysics, presupposes prior demonstration of God's existence at the level of natural philosophy (Aristotle's *Physics*).[17] More generally, White departs from the River Forest School in acknowledging the originality of St. Thomas's doctrine of the real distinction between *esse* and essence, which is the centerpiece of a Christian "metaphysics of creation."

It may be helpful to view White's account of Thomistic philosophy as mediating between, on the one hand, the identity thesis of "Aristotelico-Thomism" (as upheld by McInerny and other River Forest Thomists) and, on the other hand, the tendency in much twentieth-century Thomism to highlight the Christian, existential, and Neoplatonic dimensions of Aquinas's metaphysics. As always, the terms of mediation are all-important. White's proposal is to begin with Aristotle's causal study of substances and then, guided by St. Thomas's own principles, to show how

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[16] Benedict M. 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, at 2–3.

[17] See especially White, *Wisdom*, 204–16. Similar arguments regarding "*separatio*" and the subject of metaphysics are developed by John F. Wippel in *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 23–62; also, Lawrence Dewan, "St. Thomas, Physics, and the Principles of Metaphysics," in *Form and Being: Studies in Thomistic Metaphysics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 47–60. For a helpful survey of texts in Aquinas, see John F. X. Knasas, *The Preface to Thomistic Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990).

a progressive analysis of substances "opens organically from within" to a more ultimate level of the distinction between *esse* and essence. This allows White to affirm, in contradistinction to McInerny, the profound originality of a specifically Thomistic philosophy, and to acknowledge the importance of the Christian setting and the theological order adopted by Aquinas himself. At the same time, White can argue, with McInerny's support, that one of the main weaknesses within contemporary Thomism is the failure to appreciate Aristotle's causal metaphysics as integral to Thomas's doctrine of being and analogical knowledge of God. The following passages illustrate how White conceives the continuity between Aristotle and Aquinas, as well as the novelty of the latter's contribution to the science of being:

> Aquinas's interpretations of Aristotle's concepts and terms stand in a complex relationship to his own metaphysics of *esse* and essence, which he developed in an original way. In affirming a real distinction (or composition) of essence and existence in all created things, Thomas does not deny the Aristotelian structural principles of matter and form, substance and accidents, act and potentiality, as constituting the physical realities we experience. He introduces into such substances, however, a more fundamental distinction between the reality's essential determination . . . and the existence, or being in act of the reality (which Aquinas called its "act of existence," or *actus essendi*). (81–82)
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> If actuality is a transcendental feature of being (applicable to all the categories) then it bears intrinsic resemblances to the Thomistic notion of *esse* as a transcendental that is also common to all the categories. But being in act is also a fundamental feature of Aristotle's and Aquinas's *causal* metaphysics. Therefore, if Aquinas's real distinction between *esse* and essence can be employed to explain the being in act and being in potency of substances (and vice versa: if the *esse*/essence distinction must be understood in terms of act and potency), then Aquinas's "real distinction" is itself a causal principle, that is intelligible *in continuity with* the framework of a metaphysical science of substance and actuality *as a more ultimate discovery within this science*. (224–25)

In summary:

> I advocate for a harmonization between key elements of Aristotle's ontology as appropriated by Aquinas, on the one hand, and original elements of Aquinas's own thought, on the other. The latter are interpreted in homogeneous continuity with the former. In other words, I treat Aquinas primarily as an Aristotelian, yet without denying the original character of his metaphysics. (xxxii)

White's account of a form of continuity between Aristotle and Aquinas that opens organically to St. Thomas's more profound discovery of the act of being and *ad alterum* analogy is an extremely fruitful line of reflection. It holds the promise of a generous interpretation of Aristotle's abiding significance for metaphysics (and the best possible reading of Aristotle is deeply in accord with St. Thomas's own interpretation of the Stagirite) while doing full justice to the originality of Aquinas's own contribution to the science of being, an originality as rediscovered by Thomists such as Fabro and Gilson.[18] There are, however, some important metaphysical issues buried by White's construal of Aquinas as "primarily an Aristotelian." If White is correct in affirming a real continuity between Aristotle and Aquinas that opens a path to discovering St. Thomas's original and more ultimate discovery of the act of being, there remains the possibility that White introduces St. Thomas's "originality" too late. White insists that we begin with Aristotle's causal analysis before introducing, at a later stage of analysis or demonstration, the metaphysics of *esse*. For example, he writes:

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[18] The middle years of the twentieth century witnessed a flood of publications that emphasized, on different grounds, the novelty of Thomas Aquinas's understanding of the act of being (*actus essendi*). Despite significant differences, and even relative opposition, C. Fabro, L.-B. Geiger, E. Gilson, G. Siewerth, and J. de Finance (to name just some of the leading figures) shared the conviction that Aquinas's doctrine of being could not be assimilated to the metaphysics of Aristotle. The significance of this consensus must be seen against the backdrop of a tendency that characterized the initial phase of the modern Thomist revival to identify the philosophy of Aquinas with that of Aristotle. Of course, no one disputed the idea that Aquinas was a medieval Christian theologian whose teaching far surpassed and occasionally corrected the philosophical doctrines of the Stagirite. But the difference between the two thinkers was placed entirely on the side of revealed theology. This view of Aquinas's philosophy as "Aristotelian" was challenged from two directions. Fabro and Geiger brought to light the fundamental importance of the Platonic and Neoplatonic idea of participation within Thomas's metaphysics. Around the same time, Gilson showed how the Christian setting of Aquinas's thought, and above all, the biblical idea of creation, provided Thomas with a new horizon for metaphysical reflection. To borrow (anachronistically) an image from *Fides et Ratio*, Gilson argued that Aquinas's Christian faith prompted and inspired a genuine philosophical discovery of "the newness and radicality of being." Both of these lines of interpretation—the rediscovery of the doctrine of participation and the idea of a Christian metaphysics of creation—converged on the thesis that Aquinas's most original and enduring achievement was to provide a metaphysical account of created reality in terms of the real distinction between *esse* and essence, a distinction which presupposes and safeguards a new understanding of the act of being (*actus essendi*) as intensive perfection. "What I call *esse*," says Thomas, "is among all principles the most perfect" (*De potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9).

> An analysis of the complexity of the causal composition of creatures in terms of form and matter, substance and accident, as well as substantial act versus teleological operation, *must necessarily precede* a consideration of created *esse* and essence, if the latter notions are to be appropriately employed in order to speak about God analogically. (264) (My italics)
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> The initial concepts of "being" and of "existence" are related to simple apprehensions and judgments concerning existent realities at hand. They do not contain in themselves the conceptual depth and intensity of the notion of *esse* and essence as used to signify the real distinction and the metaphysics of creation. Correspondingly, they have a banal function in human discourse. (123)

An aspect of what is best and deepest in St. Thomas's understanding of the act of being (*actus essendi*) is missed if it is interpreted as an "addition" that leaves the beginning of philosophical reflection untouched or, even worse, if the beginning is viewed as "banal." This question regarding the beginning of metaphysics is closely related to White's unqualified rejection of any sense of a priori knowledge. Is it possible to arrive at an understanding of *esse* as the actuality of all acts and the perfection of all perfections if this sense of *esse* is not present, however implicitly, at the beginning of one's contemplative experience of beings (*ens*)? Conversely, one can ask whether there might not be a sense in which St. Thomas's novel understanding of the act of being can affect a priori the beginning of philosophical reflection. I will suggest below how this may be understood.

In order to explain the pertinence of these questions I will introduce two differences between Aristotle and St. Thomas that are under-emphasized by White: The first difference is the meaning of actuality as intensive, trans-formal, and infinite perfection. The second difference comes with the gift of Christian revelation and it concerns the possibility of a specifically "Christian philosophy."

II. *Actus non limitatur nisi per potentiam*: Aristotle and Aquinas on Actuality and Infinity

In the preceding section I cited a passage from Ralph McInerny in which he argues that there is no "specifically Thomist philosophy" and that "there are no peculiarly Thomistic philosophical principles that could supplant the Aristotelian ones he adopts."[19] One way to probe the accuracy of this thesis is to consider each author's respective account of "the first principles which are understood to be most universal . . . the principles of actuality and potentiality, for these divide being as being."[20] There are several reasons to

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[19] McInerny, *Praeambula Fidei*, 160.
[20] Thomas Aquinas, *In XII Meta.*, lect. 4, 2482–83.

recommend such a study. What could be more basic to Aristotle's vision of the world than the distinction between act and potency? If St. Thomas has a different understanding of *actus/energeia*, then McInerny's thesis will have to be qualified. A second reason for considering the meaning of actuality in Aristotle and in Aquinas is that the unlimited perfection of act is an important premise in Thomas's argument in support of God's supreme and universal perfection: "*Unumquodque perfectum est inquantum est actu; imperfectum autem secundum quod est potentia cum privatione actus. Id igitur quod nullo modo est in potentia sed est actus purus, oportet perfectissimum esse. Tale autem deus est. Est igitur perfectissimus.*"[21] The unlimited perfection of act is a crucial axiom for securing the possibility of analogical knowledge of God that safeguards the transcendence of God in relation to his created effects.

In a seminal article first published in 1952, "The Limitation of Act by Potency in St. Thomas: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism?" W. Norris Clarke called attention to the non-Aristotelian provenance of one of the fundamental principles of Thomistic metaphysics: "*actus non limitatur nisi per potentiam*," which Clarke interprets as "no act or perfection can be found in a limited degree in any being unless it is conjoined with a really distinct limiting principle whose nature is to be a potency for that act."[22] Clarke's study was provoked by the traditional and widespread assumption that, in the words of Garrigou-Lagrange, "Aristotle already taught this doctrine. . . . Act, he says, is limited and multiplied by potency. Act determines potency, actualizes potency, but is limited by the same potency."[23] Clarke uncovered a basic difficulty with this neo-Thomist view: not only is there no mention whatsoever of the doctrine of the limitation of act by potency in Aristotle's writings, but, more significantly, Aristotle conceived of limit (or finitude) as a source of perfection and unlimitedness (or infinity) as an imperfection. In the words of Aristotle, "nature flees from the infinite, for the infinite is unending or imperfect, and nature ever seeks an end."[24]

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[21] *ScG* I, c. 28: "A thing is perfect in so far as it is in act, and imperfect in so far as it is in potentiality and void of act. Wherefore that which is nowise in potentiality but is pure act, must needs be most perfect. Now such is God. Therefore He is most perfect."

[22] W. Norris Clarke, "The Limitation of Act by Potency in St. Thomas: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism," in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being—God—Person* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 67.

[23] R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Reality: A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought* (St. Louis: Herder, 1950), 43–44, cited in Clarke, "Limitation of Act," 67.

[24] Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium* I, ch. 1, 715b14. The background to Aristotle's understanding of infinity, as well as a careful interpretation of the relevant texts, is provided by Leo Sweeney, *Divine Infinity in Greek and Medieval Thought* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

This view of the finite as perfect and the infinite as imperfect is intelligible in light of Aristotle's account of the composition of form and matter as the archetype of the relation between act and potency. Clarke summarizes Aristotle's teaching as follows:

> What, then, is the genuine meaning and purpose of the act and potency composition in Aristotle? There is only one: as function of the problem of change. Whatever is capable of change of any kind—and only that—must have within it in addition to its present act a principle of potency, or capacity to receive a further act. It is this potency which enables a being to be inserted in the endless cosmic cycle of change. . . . Act, on the other hand, is always identified with the fully complete, the actually present. Pure act, therefore, is simply a correlative of the immutable, i.e., of pure actualized form, complete in all that is proper to it and incorruptible. It is immutability, self-sufficiency, and incorruptibility which for Aristotle is the primary characteristic of the "divine" and the perfect. In the notion of act so conceived there is no necessary implication of infinity, at least in the substantial order. . . . Substantial infinity would simply have no meaning in this Aristotelian universe; there is no ultimate common perfection deeper than form.[25]

The final note in this passage brings us to what I take to be a chief implication of St. Thomas's re-conception of act and potency in light of the distinction between *esse* and essence: A new understanding of actuality as trans-formal—"*esse est actualitas omnium rerum, et etiam ipsarum formarum*"[26]—coincident with a new understanding of perfection as unlimited or infinite: "*Tanto actus aliquis perfectior est, quanto minus habet potentiae permixtum. Unde omnis actus cui permiscetur potentia, habet terminum suae perfectionis: cui autem non permiscetur aliqua potentia, est absque termino perfectionis. Deus autem est actus purus absque omni potentia, ut supra ostensum est. Est igitur infinitus.*"[27]

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[25] Clarke, "Limitation of Act," 74.

[26] Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 4, a. 1, ad 3: "existence is that which actuates all things, even their forms."

[27] Thomas Aquinas, *ScG* I, c. 43: "An act is the more perfect, according as it is less mingled with potentiality. Wherefore every act that has an admixture of potentiality has a limit to its perfection: while the act which has no admixture of potentiality has no limit to its perfection. Now God is pure act without any potentiality, as we have proved above. Therefore He is infinite." Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982), interprets and develops the significance of St. Thomas's new understanding of actuality (in light of the *actus essendi*). As Schmitz indicates, "[t]he philosopher who speaks of act here can only learn humility, for his dry language can scarcely hint at the drama with which the creature first begins to be and continues to be" (110). In holding together "what is most common with what is fullest and most

More recently, John Wippel has confirmed and extended Clarke's argument by establishing beyond doubt the textual basis in Aquinas for the axiom "unreceived act is unlimited."[28] While acknowledging that he has "never succeeded in finding a demonstration or even an attempted demonstration of this point in [Aquinas's] texts,"[29] Wippel connects this axiom with St. Thomas's original understanding of *esse* as the actuality of all acts and the perfection of all perfections. "And that," Fr. Wippel concludes, ". . . seems to me to be the ultimate ontological insight that underlies Thomas's acceptance of the axiom in question. Precisely because *esse* is the actuality of all acts and the perfection of all perfections, one cannot account for its limitation simply by appealing to *esse* itself."[30]

Once the difference between Aristotle and Aquinas on unlimited act is granted, the relevant question is where to place the difference. On White's reading, the difference between the two thinkers is essentially conceived in the manner of an "addition" to, which remains essentially within the horizon of, Aristotle's principles of act and potency. In the order of discovery, as we have already cited, "[a]n analysis of the complexity of the causal composition of creatures in terms of form and matter, substance and accident, as well as substantial act versus teleological operation, *must necessarily precede* a consideration of created *esse*" (264) (my italics). In other words, St. Thomas builds on Aristotle's foundation by extending the essentially unchanged Aristotelian analysis of the act-potency composition to the more ultimate level of *esse* and essence.

There are at least two difficulties with this manner of interpreting Aquinas "primarily as an Aristotelian." First, St. Thomas's doctrine of the real distinction between *esse* and essence as a composition of act and potency is not simply an extension or application of Aristotelian principles, but a transformation of the core meaning of actuality as infinite, intensive, and trans-formal perfection. Hence the inadequacy or imbalance of White's requirement that the real distinction be "explained in terms of *previously established* causes such as form and matter, substance and operation, potentiality and actuality" (265) (my italics). This does not mean, of course, that the account of the *esse*-essence composition simply

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radical and most complete in the thing," St. Thomas gives us a light by which to understand the generosity of God at the heart of every real being.

[28] John F. Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas and the Axiom that Unreceived Act Is Unlimited," in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 123–51.

[29] John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 158.

[30] Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes II*, 151.

overturns Aristotle. On the contrary, the position I am advancing is that, for Thomas, precisely the novel originality of the discovery of the *esse*-essence composition transforms and, at the same time, preserves and deepens, the Aristotelian account of act and potency.

Second, the very character of non-subsistent *esse* as the created source of all of the perfections of a created being (*ens*) requires that it be somehow present from the mind's first contact with being. Of course, Fr. White might rejoin that we need to distinguish sharply between the *ordo inventionis* and the *ordo rerum*; *esse* may be immediately relevant in the *ordo rerum*, but it is not therefore being immediately relevant in the *ordo inventionis*. Now, a principle that becomes significant only at a later stage of philosophical demonstration is precisely not the perfection of all perfections and the actuality of all acts. Note that I am not suggesting that Thomas's original teaching on the *actus essendi* must be made explicit or thematized at the beginning of philosophical reflection; rather, I am arguing that it must be present from the start in such a way that every further step is simultaneously a deeper awareness of what was given at the beginning. I suggest that this is why, here a faithful disciple of St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas teaches that *omnia cognoscentia cognoscunt implicite Deum in quolibet cognito*—"all knowers know God implicitly in whatever they know."[31] It would take us too far afield to show how this implicit knowledge of God has nothing to do with, and, in a certain sense, is even the opposite of, a Rahnerian *Vorgriff*. For present purposes, suffice it to say that the metaphysical underpinning for this implicit knowledge of God is God's presence in his created effects by way of *esse*: "*Quandiu igitur res habet esse, tandiu oportet quod deus adsit ei, secundum modum quo esse habet. Esse autem est illud quod est magis intimum cuilibet, et quod profundius omnibus inest, cum sit formale respectu omnium quae in re sunt, ut ex supra dictis patet. Unde oportet quod deus sit in omnibus rebus, et intime.*"[32] Prompting and guiding the philosopher's search for God through his created effects (*via inventionis*) is the hidden presence of God at the origin of all being and knowing. The progressive a posteriori discoveries of the philosopher are also a retrieval of, and participation in, the a priori generosity of the Creator, who is the abiding origin of both being and the knowing of being.

This suggests a final point. There is a certain a priorism lying unnoticed within Fr. White's advocacy of Aristotelian a posteriorism: The scope of

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[31] Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 2, ad 1.

[32] Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 8, a. 1: "Therefore as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it, according to its mode of being. But being is innermost in each thing and most fundamentally inherent in all things since it is formal in respect of everything found in a thing, as was shown above. Hence it must be that God is in all things, and innermostly."

the novel originality of the discovery of *esse* is limited a priori by what Fr. White takes to be the teaching of Aristotle on act and potency. In much the same way, it is hard to see how a God who is not even implicitly known at any time prior to the achievement of an *exclusively* a posteriori demonstration of his existence is the true God. An exclusive a posteriorism leads just as surely to ontotheology as an exclusive a priorism. In either case, we lose the infinite God of philosophers or theologians, a God who is both *superior summo meo and intimior intimo meo*—"higher than my highest" and "more intimate to me than I am to myself."

III. The Question of "Christian Philosophy"

The famous debate in France in the 1930s over the possibility and meaning of a specifically "Christian philosophy" continues to generate interest and controversy. The question is often misunderstood. To ask about the meaning of "Christian philosophy" is not simply to inquire about the relationship between philosophy and theology. The more difficult issue is whether and in what sense God's revelation in Christ makes a difference to philosophy qua philosophy. Here it is helpful to recall the declaration of the First Vatican Council:

> There exists a twofold order of knowledge, distinct not only as regards their source, but also as regards their object. With regard to the source, because we know in one by natural reason, in the other by divine faith. With regard to the object, because besides those things which natural reason can attain, there are proposed for our belief mysteries hidden in God which, unless they are divinely revealed, cannot be known.[33]

Once this distinction between philosophy and theology is accepted, there is a further question regarding the relationship between philosophical reflection and the revealed mysteries of God. Can Christian faith affect natural reason in its relation to its proper object without abrogating or compromising reason's natural integrity?

   The question of "Christian philosophy" cuts close to the heart of White's fundamental concern to develop a Thomistic philosophical order of inquiry. On several occasions he acknowledges the importance of the Christian context as well as the theological order adopted by St. Thomas. Furthermore, White suggests that the broader context of Christian faith allows Aquinas to develop and reinterpret Aristotle's metaphysics in the direction of an original "metaphysics of creation." At the same time, White criticizes Étienne Gilson's notion of "Christian philosophy" as

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[33] *Dei Filius*, 3.

undermining the integrity of philosophy and the possibility of truly natural knowledge of God. The core of White's criticism of Gilson is spelled out in the following passage:

> [According to Gilson] revelation is meant to act as a guiding light for the human mind even within its properly *philosophical* order of know-ing and way of investigation. . . . One can raise the question of whether a kind of fideistic methodology has entered into Gilson's later thinking, since he seems to make the natural, philosophical specification of the human intelligence directly dependent upon the objects we know by the light of faith. St. Thomas states quite clearly in *ST* I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 2, that the light of faith gives the believer a certain judgment concerning the conclusions of natural sciences in their respective compatibility with, or opposition to, Christian faith, but that it does not befit the faith to be itself at the source of the demonstration of the principles of these sciences. In other words, the believer can judge in faith that certain philosophical conclusions are incompatible with the revealed truth to which he adheres, but in order to refute these errors, or to discover philosophical truths himself, he cannot avoid doing the work of philos-ophy. This requires an analysis of the *objects* of natural experience, *as attained by* the philosophical sciences. (130–31)

Before considering a possible objection to White's view of "Christian philosophy," it is necessary to summarize John Paul II's contribution in *Fides et Ratio*.

At the heart of John Paul II's encyclical on faith and reason is a "strong and insistent appeal . . . that faith and philosophy recover their profound unity which allows them to stand in harmony with their nature without compromising their mutual autonomy" (*FR*, 48). In the eyes of John Paul II, the contemporary crisis of reason is intimately related to the "fateful separation" of faith and reason that stems from the late medieval period and that has resulted in a false conception of philosophy as "separate from and absolutely independent of the contents of faith" (*FR*, 45). In the sixth chap-ter of the encyclical, John Paul II takes up the disputed concept of "Chris-tian philosophy" in the context of distinguishing three different stances of philosophy in relation to Christian faith. First, there is "the stance adopted by philosophy as it took shape in history before the birth of the Redeemer and later in regions as yet untouched by the Gospel" (*FR*, 75); the second stance, often designated as "Christian philosophy," is "philosophical specu-lation conceived in dynamic union with faith" (*FR*, 76); the third stance occurs when "theology itself calls upon [philosophy]" (*FR*, 77).

The term "Christian philosophy," he clarifies, "in no way intends to suggest that there is an official philosophy of the Church, since the faith as

such is not a philosophy" (*FR*, 76). Nevertheless, the influence of faith is not merely "negative" in the sense that philosophers who are also believers know that their philosophical conclusions, if true, will never contradict the faith. Faith also contributes positively to philosophy. This is why there is such a thing as "Christian philosophy," which "includes those important developments of philosophical thinking which would not have happened without the direct or indirect contribution of Christian faith" (*FR*, 76). Christian philosophy thus has two aspects: "The first is subjective, in the sense that faith purifies reason," providing philosophers with the requisite humility to engage questions "which are difficult to resolve if the data of Revelation are ignored." Examples here include the problem of evil and suffering, the personal nature of God, and finally, "the radical metaphysical question, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?'" (*FR*, 76). This leads to the second point: the influence of faith on philosophy is "objective, in the sense that it concerns content. Revelation clearly proposes certain truths which might never have been discovered by reason unaided, although they are not of themselves inaccessible to reason" (*FR*, 76). Finally, John Paul II affirms that philosophers whose thinking is positively influenced by Christian faith "have not become theologians, since they have not sought to understand and expound the truths of faith on the basis of Revelation" (*FR*, 76). Pope Benedict XVI confirms the teaching of his predecessor when he writes in *Deus Caritas Est* 28: "faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and *to see its proper object more clearly*" (italics mine).

In criticizing Gilson for the view that "revelation is meant to act as a guiding light for the human mind even within its properly *philosophical* order of knowing" (130), and in limiting the influence of faith on the structure of philosophy to that of a "negative norm," White criticizes what is essentially the position adopted and promoted by John Paul II. My point here is not to defend the position of Gilson; it may be the case that *Fides et Ratio* offers an important corrective to Gilson's account of "Christian philosophy." The relevant point is that White seems to suggest that natural reason at its source or starting point—an encounter or experience of created beings—must be completely independent from faith if it is to retain its proper integrity. The assumption underlying his criticism of Gilson is the idea that an intrinsic influence of faith represents a threat to reason's natural integrity or autonomy.

It should be noted that I agree with White in affirming that philosophy and theology have different starting points and different methods. Therefore it is illegitimate to use a datum of revelation as a premise in a philosophical argument. Once this is granted there remains the issue of

whether faith can influence natural reason "even within its properly *philosophical* order of knowing." An adequate answer to this question requires reflection on the meaning of philosophy's "autonomy." Throughout *Fides et Ratio* John Paul II develops an account of the autonomy of philosophy that is at odds with the modern idea of autonomy conceived as strict independence or neutrality. The deepest meaning of "autonomy" is disclosed within the mystery of Christ: "The mystery of the Incarnation will always remain the central point of reference for an understanding of the enigma of human existence, the created world and God himself.... In the mystery of the Incarnate Word, human nature and divine nature are safeguarded in all their autonomy, and at the same time the unique bond which sets them together in mutuality without confusion of any kind is revealed" (*FR*, 80). In concluding his reflection on faith and reason, John Paul II returns to the Christian meaning of autonomy with an exhortation to *philosophari in Maria*: "Just as in giving her assent to Gabriel's word, Mary lost nothing of her true humanity and freedom, so too when philosophy heeds the summons of the Gospel's truth its autonomy is in no way impaired. Indeed, it is then that philosophy sees all its enquiries rise to their highest expression" (*FR*, 108). For John Paul II, the positive influence of faith should enable philosophical reason to be more itself, that is, more attentive to the evidence that is in principle available to reason. This is why, *pace* White, revelation can "act as a guiding light for the human mind even within its properly *philosophical* order of knowing" (White, 130).

At this point we can recall the passage from Cardinal Ratzinger cited at the outset of this essay:

> It is my view that the neoscholastic rationalism that was trying to reconstruct the *praeambula fidei*, the approach to faith, with pure rational certainty, by means of rational argument that was strictly independent of any faith, has failed; and it cannot be otherwise for any such attempts to do that kind of thing.[34]

It is important to stress that Ratzinger does *not* deny Vatican I's teaching that natural reason can demonstrate the existence of God. The position he intends to criticize is the idea that natural reason is "strictly independent of any faith." Note that Ratzinger's rejection of this idea of autonomy as strict independence is not based on some sort of Barthian reduction of nature to grace, but on his judgment that it is inconsistent with the creaturely status of human being and knowing. In other words, the attempt to separate out a domain of absolute independence for

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[34] Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 136.

philosophy runs afoul of what philosophy itself can, in principle, know—namely, that the abiding source of all natural integrity is the generosity of God who bestows the gift of real existence, at once from "higher than my highest" and "more intimately than I am to myself." This is no mere paradox: The attempt to carve out an exclusively autonomous domain is unphilosphical. If philosophy can terminate in a discovery of the *true God* as principle and end of the world, it is because philosophy itself begins in a wonderment that, implicitly, is a response to the radical generosity of the creative act that pervades all beings within the world.

   Now, it is precisely for this reason that, according to John Paul II, the gift of faith can and should inspire philosophical reason at its origin and all along its path of discovery. For revelation, in bringing to light new mysteries, will re-confirm and deepen the novelty of the act of creation. Revelation will thus prompt and guide philosophers to contemplate and wonder more deeply over "the newness and radicality of being" (*FR*, 48). Something of the form and content of "Christian philosophy" is well expressed in the words of Paul Byrne cited by Kenneth Schmitz:

> There [in Acts 17:16–33] we read of that wonderful scene at the Areopagus in Athens when St. Paul brought something new to the Greek philosophers, namely, the absolute beginning to be of a creature totally dependent for its being on a Creator, or in other words, the very "newness" of the world itself.[35]

One of the great contributions of St. Thomas's doctrine of being is that it provides grounds for seeing how this generous dependence or "newness" is available to philosophical reason as a promise given in the mind's first contact with reality.

Conclusion: Toward a More Generous Beginning

Some years back Fergus Kerr claimed that "the deepest problem in Roman Catholic theology since Vatican II, has been the disappearance of

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[35] Paul M. Byrne, "Preface" to *On the Eternity of the Word: St. Thomas, Siger of Brabant, St. Bonaventure*, ed. C. Vollert, L. Kendzierski, and P. Byrne (Milwaukee: Marquette, 1964), ix. In a well-known essay, Josef Pieper describes the doctrine of creation as the "hidden key" to the philosophy of St. Thomas: "there is a fundamental idea by which almost all the basic concepts of his vision of the world are determined: the idea of creation, or more precisely, the notion that nothing exists which is not *creatura*, except the Creator Himself; and in addition, that this createdness determines entirely and all-pervasively the inner structure of the creature." *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. John Murray, S.J., and Daniel O'Connor (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999), 47.

serious engagement with philosophy."[36] It is refreshing to encounter in *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity* an argument that grasps the essential importance of philosophical reflection for Christian theology. What is most needed in a pragmatic and technological culture is a philosophy that remains true to its ancient vocation to seek the highest wisdom and contemplate the highest cause. "The real problem at this moment of our history," writes Benedict XVI, "is that God is disappearing from the human horizon, and, with the dimming of the light which comes from God, humanity is losing its bearings, with increasingly evident destructive effects."[37] Pope Benedict and Fr. White share the conviction that the dignity of human persons, the goodness of the created order, and the capacity of reason to attain knowledge of God through his created effects all stand or fall together. Theologians and philosophers owe a debt of gratitude to Fr. White for recalling this truth in the context of a thoughtful and constructive interpretation of the Thomistic philosophical order.

Given the importance of St. Thomas's thought for the life and mission of the Church, it is worth thinking together with Fr. White about the proper order of discovery or *via inventionis* for metaphysics. At the end of *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God the Philosophers*, Ralph McInerny offers what he calls an "irenic proposal":

> Let's reestablish Aristotelico-Thomism as the norm. Let us proceed, as Thomas does, on the assumption that Aristotle has adequately set forth the subject matter of metaphysics once and for all.[38]

It may be worth considering a different suggestion. Taking St. Thomas as a "guide and model" for Catholic thought (*FR*, 78), one could proceed, as Aquinas does, on the assumption that

> [d]ivine love did not allow him to "remain in himself without fruit," that is, without the production of creatures, but love "moved him to operate" according to a most excellent mode of operation according as he produced all things in being (*esse*). For from love of his goodness it proceeded that he willed to pour out and to communicate his goodness to others, insofar as it is possible, namely by way of similitude, and thus his goodness did not remain in him, but flowed out into others.[39]

[36] Fergus Kerr, "Foreword: Addressing this 'Giddy Synthesis,'" in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 1–13, at 13.

[37] Benedict XVI, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Concerning the Remission of the Excommunication of the Four Bishops Consecrated by Archbishop Lefebvre" (March 10, 2009).

[38] McInerny, *Praeambula Fidei*, 305.

[39] Thomas Aquinas, *In div. nom.*, c. 4, lect. 9.

If this teaching is true—if being is a *similitudo divinae bonitatis*—what kind of concrete experience of beings (*ens*) is most appropriate for the start of metaphysics? Are there not resources in St. Thomas and in the larger Catholic tradition that might help us avoid the unfortunate idea that the beginning is banal[40] and that what is best and innermost in all things only comes by way of addition?   N V

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[40] "[T]he initial concepts of 'being' and of 'existence' are related to simple apprehensions and judgments concerning existent realities at hand. They do not contain in themselves the conceptual depth and intensity of the notion of *esse* and essence as used to signify the real distinction and the metaphysics of creation. Correspondingly, they have a banal function in human discourse" (123).