

Hans Urs von Balthasar's Interpretation of the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*

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Introduction

AS SHOULD be expected of every good theologian, the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar has a solid philosophical framework.¹ The influence of Thomas Aquinas on the formulation of Balthasar's theology and

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¹ We will adopt the following abbreviations for the works of H. U. von Balthasar: *Glory 1: The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. E. Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).

Glory 2: The Glory of the Lord, vol. 2: *Studies in Theological Styles: Clerical Styles*, trans. A. Louth, F. McDonagh, and B. McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984).

Glory 4: The Glory of the Lord, vol. 4: *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, trans. B. McNeil, A. Louth, J. Saward, R. Williams, and O. Davies (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

Glory 5: The Glory of the Lord, vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. O. Davies, A. Louth, B. McNeil, J. Saward, R. Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991).

Theo-Drama 2: Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, vol. 2: *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990).

Theo-Drama 4: Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, vol. 2: *The Action*, trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).

Theo-Logic 1: Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory, vol. 1: *Truth of the World*, trans. A. J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001).

Theo-Logic 2: Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory, vol. 2: *Truth of God*, trans. A. J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

Explorations 1: Explorations in Theology, vol. 1: *The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A. V. Littledale and A. Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

philosophy is clear and shows that Balthasar regarded him with perhaps more esteem than any other theologian in history. His references to Aquinas's thought are many and span the entire range of his vast *oeuvre*.² Although Balthasar never wrote an essay exclusively devoted to him, the Swiss thinker offers an original interpretation of Aquinas's thought variously marked by the influence of other Thomistic scholars of diverse orientations, namely, Przywara, Rahner, de Lubac, Gilson, Pieper, and Siewerth.

In general it can be affirmed that the influence of Thomas on the "style"³ and framework of Balthasar's theology prevents it from shying away from the analogy of being, despite the considerable presence of authors such as Hegel⁴ and Barth.⁵ This emerges above all in the space that philosophy assumes next to theology in his thought and in the typically Thomistic equilibrium between the two,⁶ and further in the metaphysical conception of the relation between God and the world.

Thomas's "Style"

Like his master de Lubac, Balthasar "reads" the thought of the great scholastics of the thirteenth century, and in particular, that of Thomas, in continuity with the Fathers. For Thomas, as for the Fathers, the work of theology and philosophy takes place in the general framework of *sapientia christiana*.⁷

Explorations 2: Explorations in Theology, vol. 2: *Spouse of the Word*, trans. A. V. Littledale, A. Dru, B. McNeil, J. Seward, and E. T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991).

² It should be noted that in considering the inspiration that Balthasar took from Thomas, it is difficult to distinguish what is an interpretation of the authentic thought of Aquinas from what is a personal re-elaboration of themes originally found in Aquinas's writings.

³ Of course, it is Balthasar himself who uses the expression "theological style." A style, properly speaking, is only the expression (*expressio*) of the impression (*impressio*)—Balthasar borrows these terms from Bonaventure—that the splendor of a form leaves on the one who perceives it and who is always also captivated by it. Beauty and, therefore, style are not given outside of this fundamental nucleus.

⁴ Ultimately, Balthasar's notion of a "revelation in history" that manifests itself through different persons has, in my view, its origin in Hegelian historicism.

⁵ The influence of Karl Barth, whom Balthasar knew personally and about whom he wrote an important study, emerges in the latter's emphasis on the complete gratuitousness of God's revelation.

⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 2:78: "However disabled and darkened we judge the participation of man's spirit in the truth shining upon the mind from God (Augustine) or in the first principles of truth and goodness (Thomas), natural man knows what ethics and practical reason are, and the man of the Old Testament knows, in addition to that what the right relation to the living God ought to be."

⁷ See my volume *Salvezza e verità. Saggio su Agostino* (Genova: Marietti, 1989), 142–43, 157–59.

In particular, Balthasar reveals the influence of the Greek more than the Latin Fathers on Aquinas's thought, especially Denys and John Damascene. It is not the drama of Augustine that emerges in Aquinas so much as the vision of the hierarchic, "liturgical," and "sacramental" cosmos of a Denys.⁸ Thus Balthasar also accentuates the distance that separates Thomas from the intellectualistic late scholasticism of the fourteenth century. The temptation of late scholasticism (which, according to Balthasar, is sometimes present in Aquinas) is that of attempting to answer all the questions, even the idle ones, without ever sorting out and subjecting the questions themselves to discussion.⁹

Balthasar distances himself from some of the different interpretations of Thomas's thought that have appeared over the centuries: on the one hand, he distances himself from the Second Scholasticism, which impoverished Aquinas's conception of being, consigning the *actus essendi* to oblivion and with it the transcendentals convertible with being; on the other hand, Balthasar is also critical of the Maréchal and Rahnerian scholasticism of the twentieth century, which, interpreting Thomas in the light of modern transcendentalism, ran the risk of an "anthropological reduction."¹⁰

Given these general premises, we will now consider in detail some of the fundamental themes of the Balthasarian interpretation of Thomas, privileging those which appear to us to be more original and fruitful. The

⁸ Balthasar, *Glory* 2:148.

⁹ Cf. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 4:458: "Whereas High Scholasticism had made the mistake of thinking that it had to give an appropriate answer to every inquisitive question, however untheological, now in the theology of its imitators, such questions are multiplied beyond all bounds; the answers become more and more hair-splitting as the legitimate rational method of a Thomas is increasingly distorted into an unbearable rationalism by the overweening deductions of a 'theology of conclusions.' G. Siewerth, in his presentation of this process, spoke of it 'advancing into the divine ground,' because the *ratio*, abandoning all restraint, thinks itself empowered and authorized to plumb the ultimate mysteries of God. In the end this leads to Hegel's God, who is without all mystery: behold the door to atheism." And *Explorations* 1:208: "There are any number of theses deserving development which the Fathers initiated, and which, subsequently, as theology became systematized, were held unsuitable, unimportant, and so left in abeyance, a process of exclusion carried further, and with rapidity, in Scholasticism from the late Middle Ages to the present. What a wealth of material is to be found in Thomas, what a variety of approaches and aspects he suggests, how numerous the hints and promptings scattered at random through his works, compared with the dry bones of a modern textbook!"

¹⁰ On this point the influence of Gustav Siewerth on Balthasar is quite important. Relevant texts of Siewerth are his *Das Schicksal der Metaphysik von Thomas zu Heidegger* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1959) and *Die Analogie des Seienden* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1965).

organization of these themes seems somewhat problematic. I believe it would be more appropriate in the present context to adopt a kind of “inductive” approach, beginning from a consideration of human experience, which is thus more consonant with the demands of philosophy, even if a deductive approach, more distinctly theological, would also be possible.

Integral Experience

The first theme on which Balthasar dwells in his reading of Thomas’s “philosophy” seems particularly original. The synthetic human experience is an experience of finitude, but also an experience above all of relationship, of harmony, of *convenientia* with reality in its entirety. It is the intentional openness of thought and of desire (*anima est in quoddammodo omnia*) in fact that renders the experience of limitedness possible. Such a perspective allows us to overcome both a view that is objectivistic or naturalistic, that is to say, “cosmocentric,” and one that is subjectivistic-transcendental or “anthropocentric.” The point of synthesis of this experience of harmony, of *ordo* between human beings and the reality which encompasses them, is that which the Bible calls the “heart.” The heart is an openness to the transcendental dimensions spoken of in classical thought: being, truth, goodness, beauty. As Thomas often notes, these dimensions intersect and interpenetrate each other in human experience. In particular, there is no love without knowledge, just as there is no knowledge which is not shot through with desire. It is worth citing an ample and significant passage of Balthasar in this connection:

It is not by means of one isolated faculty that man is open, in knowledge and in love, to the Thou, to things and to God: it is *as a whole* (through all his faculties) that man is attuned to total reality, and no one has shown this more profoundly and more thoroughly than Thomas Aquinas. According to Thomas, what is involved here is an attunement to being as a whole, and this ontological disposition is, in the living and sentient being, an *a priori* concordance (*con-sensus* as *cum-sentire*, “to feel with,” here prior to the *assentire*, “to assent to”). In the animal this occurs instinctively, but in man this accord is from the outset bound up with a certain spiritual delectation (Ia-IIae 15, 1c and ad 3). The inclination to the “thing itself” (*inclinatio ad rem ipsam*), evoked by a most intimate kinship with it, is characterized as a “feeling” or “sensing”—an experiential contact—insofar as the feeler is by his nature attuned to what is felt and, therefore, as-sents and con-sents to it (“*accipit nomen sensus, quasi experientiam quandam sumens de re cui inhaeret, in quantum complacet sibi in ea.*” Ibid., c). This ontological concordance, therefore, and the affirmation and joy in being which are implied by it, lie at a much deeper level than the *delectatio* which naturally accompanies all the individual spiritual acts which are

ordered to their proper object and which proceed from the storehouse of that primal and original consonance, whether this natural *delectatio* consists of spiritual or sensuous delight or joy, depending on its specific acts and their objects. Such attunement to being on the part of the feeling and experiencing subject is, consequently, also prior to the distinction between passive and active experience: in the reciprocity which is founded on openness to reality there is contained both the receptivity to extraneous im-pression and the ex-pressing of the self onto the extraneous. Thus the fundamental act of feeling (the "primal feeling") consists of the consent (*con-sensus*) both to suffer the extraneous impressions and to act upon the extraneous, and both of these are equally the cause of primal joy. By comparison with this most profound level of reality, the opposition between (joyful) desire and defensive fear is itself secondary: for this opposition has to do with particular existents, with particular proportions or disproportions between subject and object; it does not directly touch the relationship as such with being. But God is not a particular existent; rather he reveals himself out of and within the depths of being, which in its totality points to God as to its ground. For this reason what has been said above applies first of all to God, in a way which is, of course, conditioned by the analogy of being between God and the creature.¹¹

As is highlighted at the end of the passage just cited, human experience—despite the fact that it always derives its primary evidence from the senses¹²—is, in the end, openness to the Absolute, harmonious relation with God, but not, of course, in an ontologistic sense.¹³ There is in experience an implicit knowledge of God (*omnia naturaliter appetunt Deum implicite, non autem explicite* [*De veritate*, q. 22, a. 2])¹⁴ and an implicit love of God (*omnia appetendo proprias perfectiones appetunt ipsum Deum* [*ST I*, q. 6,

¹¹ Balthasar, *Glory* 1:244–45. [Translation slightly altered. —Trans.] Cf. *Glory* 2:107: "Augustine lays the foundation for a major thesis of Thomas Aquinas when he says, 'I know that I can only know if I am alive, and I know this all the more certainly in that I become more alive by knowing' (*De vera religione*, 97). 'You did not prefer something else to life, you preferred a better life to a particular life' (*De libero arbitrio*, 1.17). It is a law which determines both the intensification and foundation of existence. 'To be in order to be alive, to be alive in order to understand' (*Soliloquia*, 2.1). There is in the *cogito* that which is fundamentally self-evident to the eye of the mind: the recognition of precedence, a preference for the higher and better which entails risk and choice. . . ." Cf. *Glory* 1:294–96.

¹² Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 12, a. 12: "[T]antum se nostra naturalis cognitio extendere potest, in quantum manuduci potest per sensibilia."

¹³ Cf. Balthasar, *Glory* 4:394–95: "Detaching esse and its transcendental truth from God frees Thomas of any suspicion of ontologism, as if God were thought of, however unconsciously, as the first thing known."

¹⁴ Cf. Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 2:103 ff.

a. 1, ad 2]).¹⁵ “God’s quality of ‘being implicit’ is nothing other than his form of revelation in the created world: revealed in an ever-greater concealment.”¹⁶ The distinction between the level of the implicit—or experience—and the level of the explicit—or reflection—is fundamental for Thomas.¹⁷ Once God is known, it is also possible in experience to forget about the creature who is permitted to ascend to him: “Consequently, when a thing is known by means of a resemblance existing in its effect, the cognitive motion can pass over immediately to the cause without thinking about the thing. This is the way in which the intellect of a person still in this life can think of God without thinking of any creature.”¹⁸

Being is the principal transcendental without which the other transcendentals could not subsist. Nevertheless, Balthasar makes it quite clear that without the co-presence of the other transcendentals, being could not adequately manifest itself to us.¹⁹ Although a certain rationalistic scholasticism tended to neglect the different transcendental perspectives on being, this was certainly not the case for Thomas. Let us consider in detail the other three transcendentals.²⁰

Balthasar observes apropos the beautiful (which Aquinas does not explicitly number among the transcendentals): “Thomas described being as a ‘sure light’ for what exists. Will this light not necessarily die out where the very language of light has been forgotten and the mystery of being is no longer allowed to express itself? What remains then is a mere lump of existence, which, even if it claims for itself the freedom proper to spirits, nevertheless remains totally dark and incomprehensible even to itself. The witness borne by being becomes untrustworthy for the person who can no longer read the

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 99. Cf. *Glory* 1:162: “For Thomas, neither Christian doctrine nor the miracles that attest to it would say anything to man without the *interior instinctus et attractus doctrinae* (*In Joh.*, ch. 6, 1, 4, n. 7; *In Rom.*, ch. 8, 1, 6), which he also calls *inspiratio interna* and *experimentum*. This is but a new formulation of the Augustinian *trahi* (being drawn by love’s gravitational pull), which for Thomas now becomes the gravitational pull of being itself.”

¹⁶ Balthasar, *Glory* 1:450 [My own translation. —Trans.].

¹⁷ Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D. L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 50.

¹⁸ *De veritate*, q. 8, a. 3, ad 18.

¹⁹ Cf. Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 1:7. It is not by chance that the theme of the transcendentals, of their articulation and convertibility, which is taken over from Thomas, is the organizing principle of Balthasar’s *opus magnum*, namely, the trilogy comprised by the Logic, the Aesthetics, and the Theological Dramatics.

²⁰ In regard to unity as a transcendental, see Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 1:156: “We do not know what unity is in truth; we are acquainted with unity only in the irreversible duality of universal unity and particular unity, and we can never make these two aspects coincide. We can never lay hold of what unity is above this duality.”

language of beauty.”²¹ And again: “If the *verum* lacks that *splendor* which for Thomas is the distinctive mark of the beautiful, then the knowledge of truth remains pragmatic and formalistic. The only concern of such knowledge will then merely be the verification of correct facts and laws, whether the latter are laws of being or laws of thought, categories or ideas.”²²

For Thomas, the beautiful represents, in a certain sense, the splendor of being, of its truth (*splendor veri*), that about being which enchants us. It is not an accident that beauty constitutes a synthesis of the true and the good. In fact, *pulchra dicuntur quae visa placent*.²³ It is not because it is loved that something is beautiful, but rather it is loved because it is beautiful in itself. The relation to the cognitive faculties is what distinguishes the beautiful from the good and makes it shine forth from the true as *pulchritudo veritatis*. This last aspect corresponds to the particular charism of Aquinas: *maxima pulchritudo humanae naturae consistit in splendore scientiae*.²⁴

There is no explicit theological aesthetics in Thomas, but there is a philosophical aesthetics. Thomas's treatment of the beautiful is influenced, on the one hand, by Denys, by his conception of *integritas*, of *claritas*, and of *consonantia*, and, on the other, by an Aristotelian current: “With Albert both strands of the aesthetics of antiquity—the Aristotelian one of harmony and the Plotinian one of light, which had never formed a proper opposition—converge effortlessly; with Ulrich [of Strasbourg] Denys once more gains the upper hand; with Thomas the true balance is found through his metaphysics of *esse* and *essentia* and his emphasis on secondary causality which made that possible.”²⁵ Thomas's aesthetics are intimately connected with his metaphysics of being and, in particular, with his conception of *ordo*, of *consonantia*, of *harmonia*,²⁶ of the *debita proportio*, of the *convenientia*, and of the *commensuratio* between creatures that points to the Creator: “from the fact that all things interpenetrate, each in the other in a reciprocal order, it follows that they are ordered to a single *ultimum*.”²⁷ In regard to this, Balthasar observes that “in Thomas the definitive aesthetic

²¹ Balthasar, *Glory* 1:19. [Translation slightly altered. —Trans.]

²² Ibid., 152. [Translation slightly altered. —Trans.]

²³ “Those things are called beautiful which please when seen” (*ST I*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1).

²⁴ “The pinnacle of the beauty of human nature consists in the splendor of knowledge” (*De malo*, q. 4, a. 2, obj. 17). [In the 2003 Oxford University Press English edition of the *De malo*, by Richard Regan and Brian Davies, this text appears in q. 4, a. 2, II, obj. 2. —Trans.]

²⁵ Balthasar, *Glory* 4:385–86.

²⁶ Cf. Aquinas, *In Div. Nom.* 4, lect. 8: “Proportiones autem in sonis vocantur harmoniae, et per quamdam similitudinem, proportiones convenientes quarumcumque rerum harmonia dicuntur.”

²⁷ Ibid., 44, lect. 5.

concepts do not center around ‘form’ (with its essential parts and interior light) but have to be concepts implying comparative relation: *ordo, ordinatio, dispositio, proportio, proportionalitas*. . . . [T]he creature itself is essentially a *proportio* between *esse* and *essentia*, so that its relation vis-à-vis God becomes a ‘relation of a relation,’ what Thomas calls *proportionalitas*, a suspension of a suspension (*Schwebe einer Schwebe*).²⁸

The transcendental “good” reveals itself, thanks to *appetitus* and *voluntas*, in the movement toward beings. Insofar as the good is coincident with the end of the action, it constitutes, according to Thomas, the first principle of the practical use of reason. The good, making freedom possible as free will (*libertas minor*) and as fulfillment (*libertas maior*), opens up the “dramatic” dimension of being and of human existence. If this dimension is not developed, being does not fully reveal itself to human beings.²⁹

In the end the true (*omne ens est verum*) represents the transparent and luminous dimension of being—that through which being reveals itself to human reason. Love is more primordial than truth (it makes the drive toward the true possible), but in human beings it does not manifest itself apart from the true.³⁰ In this regard, Balthasar observes:

According to Thomas, truth is primarily *in intellectu*, in the judgment of the mind, which, however, could not judge if things did not disclose themselves to it in the truth of their being, as the first volume [of the *Theo-Logic*] demonstrated at length in discussing the inseparability, indeed, the mutual intensification, of spontaneity and receptivity, of *abstractio* and *conversio ad phantasmata*, of laying hold and letting be, of synthesis and analysis. And insofar as freedom already plays a decisive role in truth, in that responsibility makes no sense without ethics, the cleavage returns undiminished in the sphere of the good. Over against the Thomistic *bonum est in rebus* [good is in things], which as such, that is, as beings, are *appetibles* [appetible], stands the norm of being good and good action in the subject. And yet, what offers itself to be loved and what selflessly communicates itself in its striving converge beyond themselves. Even in the cleavage that traverses their worldly form, the transcendentals necessarily pervade one another, yet, in virtue of this same cleavage, hence, of their “finitude,” they point together beyond themselves. In other words, as the natural unfoldings of *ens completum et simplex sed non subsistens*, they all together contain a super-finite, super-essential aspect by which they point to their origin, their conservation, and their end in God.³¹

²⁸ Balthasar, *Glory* 4:408–9.

²⁹ It should be noted that in this context Balthasar incorporates twentieth-century dialogical thought.

³⁰ Cf. Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 1.

³¹ Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 2:183–84. [Translation slightly altered. —Trans.]

Finally, in regard to the transcendentals in their interconnectedness, Balthasar says:

If Christianity brought the ancient philosophy of the human spirit—insofar as it is openness to the whole of being and thus to its transcendental properties (unity, truth, goodness, beauty)—to its fulfilment, this was only possible because ancient thought had the *theion* present to it in being, even if only by analogy. Post-Christian thought, which rejects such a presence as “Christian” presumption, will also want to reject antiquity’s openness to being in all its totality (or like Heidegger exclude the *theos* because it is a Christian element). Thus it will narrow the true and the good, within a purely anthropological perspective, to plain “interest.” Interest, however, while it is an accompaniment of the good, is not its center. And it is impossible to abstract from the latter for the sake of a “pure” cognition. For the true is “in its way an aspect of the good” (Thomas) because in both aspects, being shows itself to be self-giving (and hence profoundly beautiful).³²

From Being as “Gift” to Being as Freedom

Being, the fundamental transcendental and the first evidence of the intellect, constitutes, as *habens esse* (that is, insofar it is as actuated by the act of being), a gift, something which is not owed. It reveals a fundamental dimension of gratuity, of love, which Thomas highlights,³³ and has to do first of all with human beings themselves, those who pose the question about being. It is not by chance that the theme of being in Balthasar is intimately connected with that of love,³⁴ of the person, of the *Thou*. On the basis of Thomas’s ontology it is possible to draw together a synthesis of the instances of transcendentality, in the classical sense, and those of personalism and dialogical thought.³⁵ Such a synthesis is given in the experience of

³² Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 2:424–25.

³³ Cf. *ST* I, q. 21, a. 4: “The work of divine justice always presupposes the work of mercy; and is founded thereupon. For nothing is due to creatures, except for something preexisting in them, or foreknown. Again, if this is due to a creature, it must be due on account of something that precedes. Again, since we cannot go on to infinity, we must come to something that only depends on the goodness of the divine will—which is the ultimate end.”

³⁴ In regard to the theme of being (*esse*) as gift and love, cf. Balthasar, *Glory* 4:374; 5:440, 626, 636, 647.

³⁵ “Now man exists only in dialogue with his neighbor. The infant is brought to consciousness of himself only by love, by the smile of his mother. In that encounter, the horizon of all unlimited being opens itself for him, revealing four things to him: (1) that he is one in love with the mother, even in being other than his mother, therefore all being is one; (2) that love is good, therefore all Being is good; (3) that love is true, therefore all Being is true; and (4) that that love evokes

love. It can be legitimately affirmed on the basis of the Thomistic text that being is love and love is being:³⁶ “Being itself is a similitude of the divine goodness,”³⁷ and “things . . . insofar as they exist, bear the likeness of the divine goodness.”³⁸

In one of the last writings in which he presents his thought in a synthetic way, Balthasar points out in regard to being that “[man] exists as a limited being in a limited world, but his reason is open to the unlimited, to all of Being. The proof consists in the recognition of his finitude, of his contingency: I am, but I could also, however, not be. Many things that do not exist could exist. Essences are limited but Being is not. This scission, the real distinction of St. Thomas, is the source of all the religious and philosophical thought of humanity.”³⁹ To an ontological consideration, in fact, each being is reducible to two co-original fundamentals: the act of being (*actus essendi* or *esse*)⁴⁰ and essence (*essentia*).

Balthasar notes:

Every attempt at tidily dividing these two spheres [essence and existence] is doomed to failure by their indivisible interrelation. The intellectual model of “metaphysical” composition out of diverse parts and elements is inadequate to explain finite being. We can account for it, then, only by consistently invoking the phenomenon of polarity. Polarity means that the poles, even as they are in tension, exist strictly through each other. This is probably nowhere more conspicuous than in the polarity between essence and existence in finite being. The two poles co-inhere in an intimate unity that constitutes the irresolvable mystery of created being. Indeed, this unity is so intimate that it frus-

joy, therefore all Being is beautiful. We add here that the epiphany of Being has sense only if in the appearance [*Erscheinung*] we grasp the essence that manifests itself [*Ding an sich*]. The infant comes to the knowledge, not of a pure appearance, but of his mother in herself. That does not exclude our grasping the essence only through the manifestation and not in itself (St. Thomas).” Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect*, trans. K. Hamilton et al. (San Francisco: Communio Books/Ignatius Press, 1993), 114–15.

³⁶ “The sign of the God who empties himself into humanity, death, and abandonment by God, shows why God came forth from himself, indeed descended below himself, as creator of the world: it corresponds to his absolute being and essence to reveal himself in this unfathomable and absolutely uncompelled freedom as inexhaustible love. This love is not the absolute Good beyond being, but is the depth and height, the length and breadth of being itself” (Balthasar, *Love Alone*, 144).

³⁷ “Ipsum esse est similitudo divinae bonitatis” (Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 2, ad 2.)

³⁸ “[R]es . . . in quantum sunt, divinae bonitatis similitudinem gerunt” (Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* III, c. 65).

³⁹ Cf. Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect*, 112. [Translation slightly altered. —Trans.]

⁴⁰ Cf. Balthasar, *Glory* 4:374.

trates every attempt to define one pole as the seat of mystery and to lay hold of the other as if it were devoid of it. . . . Each pole can in some respect be grasped, but in being grasped it always immediately points beyond itself to the other pole as what has not yet been grasped.⁴¹

In regard to one of the two poles of the fundamental polarity of every being, namely, *esse* and *esse commune*—the common and intimate perfection of all beings, Balthasar observes:

Thomas, here at his most competent, and free from the suspicion of any dependence on Denys, will designate as *ens commune* or *esse*, that which for him is neither God nor the sum of all individual worldly *entia* nor (what finally suggests itself) a conceptual abstraction (*conceptus entis*), but the first *created* reality proceeding from God, by participating in which all beings really are, something “abundant, simple, not-subsisting,” “universal,” “flowing,” participating in an infinite manner and thence in itself infinite, lending form inexhaustibly, which however is distinguished from God by the fact that God subsists in himself, while being only subsists in finite beings. This being which Thomas uniquely discerned with his sharp sight and comprehensively defended but which was *intended* by Denys when he described being-in-itself as the first procession from God, and which without doubt was intended by the other scholastics when they explained it as the object of metaphysics: *this being is creaturely reality insofar as it is seen and conceived as the all-embracing manifestation of God*. It is therefore a *theophanic* being, in the classical but also in the thoroughly Pauline sense (Rom 1:18–21; Acts 17:22–29), to which unity, truth, goodness, and beauty do not belong as properties possessed at one’s own disposal—how could they since this being does not subsist as such?—but with which it rather, insofar as they adhere to it, refers to the primordial ground of being which replicates itself in it in an image: *ipsum esse est similitudo divinae bonitatis*.⁴²

Although there is a certain primacy of the act of being over essence in each being, since without this act the being would not exist, it is nevertheless true that essence—and Balthasar firmly emphasizes this—is never reducible to the act of being:

Let us take as our starting point the fundamental form that difference displays in the creaturely realm: there is a real (that is, capable of being

⁴¹ Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 1:105–6. The Balthasarian theme of “polarity” as constitutive of every finite being probably derives from Guardini. Cf. Romano Guardini, *Gegensatz: Versuche zu einer Philosophie des Lebendig-Konkreten* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1925).

⁴² Balthasar, *Glory* 4:374. [Balthasar quotes from *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 2, ad 2: “Being itself is a likeness of the divine goodness.” —Trans.].

gathered from the existent [*Seiendes*] itself) difference between *esse*, which signifies *aliquid simplex et completum sed non subsistens*,⁴³ and the finite essence in which it attains subsistence. However, this difference must not be understood as the fitting together of two parts to form a whole. Neither aspect is ever conceivable without the other. “The poles, even as they are in tension, exist strictly through each other. This is probably nowhere more conspicuous than in the polarity between essence and existence.”⁴⁴ We can lay hold of nonsubsistent being [*Sein*] only in what factually exists (even if we were to imagine a purely possible essence, in the same act we would have to conceive the possibility of its existence as well); a finite creature is such in virtue of the fact that it subsists. “Strictly speaking, being cannot be said to be. Only something that is in virtue of being can be said to be” [*De divinis nominibus*, ch. 8, lect. 1]. And the whole is said to be created (it is not as though the essence were a mere idea of God that he then realized by adding being to it: *Ipsa quidditas creari dicitur* (*De potentia*, q. 3, a. 5, ad 2)). The fact that being pours itself out into the plurality of creatures as both actual (*simplex completum*) and nonsubsistent and that it cannot be apprehended (let alone solidified in a concept) except in this outpouring, reveals it to be the pure and free expression of the divine *bonitatis* and *liberalitatis*. This goodness and liberality aim at the necessary plurality and manifoldness of created essences, since nonsubsistent being could not attain to subsistence in *one* essence without being God. . . .⁴⁵

The determinateness of being is not in fact implicit in the notion of the act of being. Thus both principles are originaive, although they require, each in its turn, a common transcendent origin.

The *actus essendi*, that principle which gives existence to all beings, is “in suspension” because it is transcendent (“other” than beings) and, at the same time, immanent in respect to beings. *Esse* “is at once both total fullness and total nothingness: fullness because it is the most noble, the first and most proper effect of God, because ‘through being God causes all things’ and ‘being is prior to and more interior than all other effects.’ But being is also nothingness since it does not exist as such, ‘for just as one cannot say that running runs,’ but rather that ‘the runner runs,’ so one cannot say that ‘existence exists.’”⁴⁶ Thus *esse* presents something “disproportionate” in itself and so points toward a Donator, a Cause of being. Essence, however, points toward a Fullness of perfection and of determinacy in a personalistic sense which was thought *ab origine*.

In regard to determinacy it is observed that:

⁴³ Cf. Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 7: “[B]eing is not subsisting but inherent.”

⁴⁴ TL, I, p. 158 f.

⁴⁵ Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 2:182.

⁴⁶ Balthasar, *Glory* 4:404.

[t]he *indifferentia* of the abundance which is characteristic of the Being of the existent entity radically excludes every form of planning within Being in order to actualize itself in substance through a determinate ascending sequence of stages of essential forms, which contain it first as “vessels” and then (as Heidegger says) finally shepherd it. For the “plans” lie in the entity and not in Being, however true it may be that there are no entities that do not participate in Being. Thus all those forms of interpretation must be rejected as “oblivious of Being” which conceive of the totality of the essential reality of the world as the (self-) explication of Being: whether Being (God) explicates itself statically in a world as the unitive implication of all entities (Plotinus, Nicolas of Cusa, Böhme), or whether Being (God) as the non-subsisting epitome of all entities actualizes itself dynamically through a world (Fichte, Hölderlin as philosopher, Schelling, Hegel, the early Soloviev).⁴⁷

Given these premises, the Absolute must be thought as Subsisting Being,⁴⁸ as Efficient Cause of *esse*, and, simultaneously, as Infinite Essence, Highest Perfection, Origin of all finite determinations. It must also be thought as creative Freedom, thus in a “personalistic” sense, since this is the maximum perfection to be found among creatures. In Balthasar's view the “limits” inherent in the diverse determinations of beings (which must no longer be thought as something negative)⁴⁹ and the “gift” of existence

⁴⁷ Ibid., 5:620. Cf. from the same passage: “And correspondingly, the category of ‘expression’ must be rejected as a precise statement of the relationship between Being which prevails without substance as abundance, and the participating entity; for ‘expression’ presupposes a responsible decision to express oneself, which Being as such does not make, because it attains such decisiveness only within the existent spirit. Only in an analogical sense (which however is not considered in the systems mentioned above) can it be said that every form of actuality—whether as individual existent or world totality—expresses something of the fullness of reality (but precisely *without* the latter's expressing itself.”

⁴⁸ Cf. Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 2:134–35, n. 10: “J.-L. Marion seems in his two works *L'idole et la distance* (Paris: Grasset, 1979) and *Dieu sans l'être* (Paris: Fayard, 1982) to concede too much to the critique of Heidegger and others and to disregard the passages where Siewerth and even Thomas define *bonum* as the intrinsic ‘self-transcending’ of *esse*. This does not mean that we must (like the late Hengstenberg) leave *esse* (rightly understood) behind us as something penultimate—which, in any case, is an impossibility for thought. True, only the absolute goodness of God can make sense of something like a nonsubsistent act of being (for finite beings). Nevertheless, however much this act of being is a “likeness of God” in the world (Siewerth), it does not flow forth (*emenat*) from somewhere above the Divine Being, which, as we have sufficiently shown, is itself the abyss of all love.”

⁴⁹ Balthasar, *Glory* 4:403–4: “[A]nd the essences of things must not appear as simply the fragmentation of reality in the negative sense, but must be seen positively as posited and determined by God's omnipotent freedom and therefore are grounded in the unique love of God. . . . [I]t is precisely when the creature feels itself to be

are only explicable in light of the Absolute Freedom.⁵⁰ As Thomas affirms: “Sunt autem differentiae entis possibile et necessarium, et ideo ex ipsa voluntate divina originator necessitas et contingentia in rebus . . . sicut a prima causa, quae transcendit ordinem necessitates et contingentiae.”⁵¹

separate in being from God that it knows itself to be the most immediate object of God’s love and concern; and it is precisely when its essential finitude shows it to be something quite different from God, that it knows that, as a real being, it has had bestowed upon it that most extravagant gift—participation in the real being of God.”

⁵⁰ Working within a fundamentally Thomistic framework, Balthasar elaborates his own *via* to God, the main steps of which are the following:

- (a) In being present to myself, two things are discovered together: the irreducibility or the absolute inparticipability of my “I” (which is rendered possible by the act of being which actuates me as an individual) and the unlimited participability of the act of being as such. The same experience of being reveals both of these aspects.
- (b) I am this singular and unrepeatable being, but only if I allow innumerable others to be singular and unrepeatable.
- (c) I experience my freedom (the first pole of freedom as free will) insofar as (1) I am a determinate and irreplaceable being and (2) I am open to being in all its plenitude.
- (d) As a finite being I must adhere to being in order to actualize myself (the other pole of freedom as *libertas maior*). Nevertheless, I cannot take possession of being but need that being so that I might be considered good. Only in this way can being fulfill me.
- (e) That being which is the first of the transcendentals does not satiate my desire but generates a spurious infinity.
- (f) Through a human “I” that addresses itself to my “I” an Absolute “I” manifests itself. There is in being the promise of a donator (*donatore*). This donator would be free from the limits of essence but would not need to be indeterminate since it is from the richness of being that the determinateness of essences and the “I’s” of spiritual beings are derived.
- (g) The self-possession of finite freedom contains a moment of absoluteness, a “finite infinity,” which, however, is neither capable of taking possession of its own origin (insofar as finite freedom exists as “given”) nor of reaching its *telos*, even though it seek all the goods and values (whether personal or otherwise) of the world. Because freedom is both autonomy and infinite movement toward its source in God, infinite freedom constitutes the innermost essence of finite freedom. See, for example, Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 2:189–334 *passim*.
- (h) My freedom can only be satiated by a subsistent and infinite being that contains all the riches of being in itself and is infinite freedom. Only that which is at the same time absolute Being and absolute Freedom can give space to my freedom.

⁵¹ “[T]he possible and the necessary are differences of being and the necessity and contingency in things originates in the divine will itself . . . and yet the first cause transcends the order of necessity and contingency” (Aquinas, *In peri hermeneias*, 14, 22). Cf. Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 1:240–41

In regard to the divine names Balthasar takes account of both cataphatic and apophatic theology. While showing that the latter always presupposes the former,⁵² he gives special emphasis to Thomas's expression: "The highest point of human knowledge of God is to know that we do not know him since God's being exceeds what we can comprehend."⁵³ Aquinas's negative theology is, first and foremost, situated in the Dionysian tradition. Among the divine attributes, Balthasar pays particular attention to—together with being as pure Act of existence—freedom, which is decisive in Aquinas's thought but perhaps not sufficiently emphasized by him.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, in regard to divine freedom Balthasar specifies that "[i]t is both superfluous and self-contradictory to look," as Schelling does, "for a further reason behind that which grounds everything."⁵⁵ God's freedom cannot but coincide—according to the logic of Thomas's thought—with the actuality of his essence, which is identical with his *esse*.

Trinity and Creation

In Balthasar's view, God's freedom in creating the world is closely connected with the divine Trinitarian life. Since in God there is a Trinitarian life (in him essence coincides with a subsisting relation) he has no need to complete himself by creating the world. Balthasar shows the decisive importance of the Trinity-creation connection, present in Thomas but typically neglected by successive scholastic theology:⁵⁶

If, within God's identity, there is an Other, who at the same time is the image of the Father and thus the archetype of all that can be created;

⁵² Cf. Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 5: "Intellectus negationis semper fundatur in aliqua affirmatione. . . . Nisi intellectus humanus aliquid de Deo affirmative cognosceret, nihil de Deo posset negare." ["Negation is always based on affirmation. . . . Unless the human mind knew something positively about God, it would be unable to deny anything about him."]

⁵³ Cf., for example, Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 2:100. Balthasar references *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 5, ad 14.

⁵⁴ Cf. Balthasar, *Glory* 4:406–7: "The metaphysics of Thomas is thus the philosophical reflection of the free glory of the living God of the Bible and in this way the interior completion of ancient (and thus human) philosophy. It is a celebration of the reality of the real, of the all embracing mystery of being which surpasses the powers of human thought, a mystery pregnant with the very mystery of God, a mystery in which creatures have access to participation in the reality of God, a mystery which in its nothingness and non-subsistence is shot through with the light of the freedom of the creative principle, of unfathomable love."

⁵⁵ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 2:255.

⁵⁶ Cf. G. Marengo, *Trinità e creazione: Indagine sulla teologia di Tommaso d'Aquino* (Roma: Città Nuova, 1990).

if, within this identity, there is the Spirit, who is the free, superabundant love of the “One” and of the “Other,” then both the otherness of creation, which is modeled on the archetypal otherness within God, and its sheer existence, which it owes to the intra-divine liberality, are brought into a positive relationship to God. Such a relationship is beyond the imagination of any non-Christian religion (including Judaism and Islam), for wherever God (even in the person of Yahweh and Allah) can only be the One, it remains impossible to discover any satisfactory explanation of the Other. In these circumstances, philosophical reflection (which never truly occurred in Judaism or Islam) inevitably conceives the world, in its otherness and multiplicity, as a fall from the One, whose blessedness is only in itself.⁵⁷

According to Balthasar, Aquinas’s conception of creation, the fruit of his speculative effort, admirably safeguards both the transcendence of the Absolute and the value of the autonomy of the creature. In this conception the created being stands as in suspension before a free God who holds it in being. The creature is even able to desire to unite itself with the Creator without being constrained to negate itself in its essence.

Balthasar notes that “where the immanent analogy of being between *actus essendi* and *essentia* does not deepen to a transcendental analogy of being between God and the world, it annuls itself by becoming identity and pays the price that it now needs to reconcile within itself the most contradictory elements—as is the case with Giordano Bruno.”⁵⁸ For Thomas, however the act of being is analogical and thus adapts itself to the diversity and richness of the real. And this is so because, although the act of being is accessible to the human intellect within the temporal dimension, it transcends the temporal insofar as it is non-subsisting and participated, pointing beyond itself to the subsisting Act of being, from which it freely emanates and which also founds the order of “essential” determinations. On this understanding, God is the Act of being, not a being, not a substance like creatures. He is the Foundation, but the world cannot be rationalistically deduced from him. In Aquinas’s thought the relation of intrinsic analogy of attribution that is established between God and the world preserves the analogy between beings within the world, which is attested to by experience. According to Balthasar, the absence in Heidegger of the “great analogy” fails to preserve in its conception the “lesser analogy.” The result is a univocal conception of being.

Balthasar makes a further clarification in regard to the “ontological difference” between being and existents in Thomas: “This mode of thought

⁵⁷ Balthasar, *Theo-Logic* 2:180–81.

⁵⁸ Balthasar, *Glory* 5:449.

does not, as Heidegger says, reduce the difference 'to a mere distinction, to the potency of our intellects'—that only happens when a pedantic scholasticism turns the mystery into a 'real distinction,' etc. But for Thomas this structure remains *the* sign of the intermediate non-absoluteness, speaking in Christian terms, of creatureliness: for how can a non-subsisting act of being generate subsisting beings from itself alone, and how are the essences to acquire a closed and meaningful form? Both these questions therefore point to a subsisting and absolute being, God, who both offers a share in his abundance of being (in the *actus essendi illimitatus*) and also from his absolute power and freedom (which as such presupposes nothingness as the locus of the ability to create) devises the forms of essences as the recipients of this participation in being."⁵⁹

The "ontological difference," which is, according to Thomas, constitutive of finite being, is minimized by thinkers after him: "The period following Thomas was not able to sustain this state of tension and either reduced *esse* to a supreme and completely empty essential concept, which—as pure being 'there'—can be derived, abstracted, effortlessly from essences: this is rationalism; or it so consolidated *esse* in itself that it coincides with God and now generates essences from itself in the divine cosmic process: this is pantheistic idealism."⁶⁰ The one way leads to positivism:

[W]hen being is simply being "there," something simply posited in a colorless, valueless way, it is robbed of its transcendental fullness, [it] is in itself neither true nor good nor beautiful and this immediately affects the natures to whom it gives its "thereness"—as we shall see later. And the second response also leads, in a roundabout way, to the same self-destruction of philosophy (as the transition from Hegel to Feuerbach shows). For if being necessarily generates itself in finite natures, it must itself be finite and so turn into the potentiality of man, with the result that finite man is greater than what he thinks in his philosophy. Man remains in both cases the question-mark left over behind reality, as the only "glory"—questionable yet worthy of our questions—which is left.⁶¹

As has already been noted, in Balthasar's view not even Heidegger—insofar as he forgets the ontological difference—is able to free himself from the anthropocentrism that characterizes modernity:

Heidegger . . . who belongs to the post-Christian age, revokes the Christian distinction between limitless non-subsisting being and limitless subsisting being. He creates the notion of a super-conceptual *actus*

⁵⁹ Balthasar, *Glory* 5:446.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4:405. [The translation is my own. —Trans.]

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 4:405–6.

essendi which renders itself temporal within essences, by attributing to it the properties of the subsisting (divine) act. And because the former must be radically annihilated in order to attain temporal expression, this nothingness, which makes the subjective-objective “illumination” (*Lichtung*) possible, becomes an attribute of absolute being. In other words: Heidegger identifies the negations of the classical, Christian doctrine of God (as “negative theology”) with the nothingness of the act of being which constitutes the world. The consequence of this is that once again (as with Eriugena, Eckhart, and Nicolas of Cusa) God has need of the world if he wishes to make explicit his own implications, so that no *analogia entis* prevails in the distinction between being and existent, but rather an *identitas* which both generates the distinction and embraces it at the same time. Heidegger initially denied that being stands in “need” of the existent in order to become itself, although later he affirmed it in ever clearer terms.⁶²

The Thomistic conception of the analogy between God and the world is consistent with his Christology. The Christ-event, insofar as it is an immediate synthesis of transcendence and immanence, makes it possible to clarify the creative relationship. The order of redemption reinforces that of creation. The analogy/Christology connection, the order of creation/order of redemption, of an essentially Augustinian and Thomistic type, constitutes the framework of the philosophy and theology of Balthasar.

As we saw before, in Thomas’s metaphysical conception of the world and, therefore, of man, there is a decisive space of autonomy. Of this autonomy Balthasar observes: “The appearance of limitation is unavoidable, since the creature is given a nature which is not as such divine—*Deus non intrat essentiam rerum creaturarum* (*De potentia*, q. 3, a. 5, ad 1)—and hence too its own area of operation, which becomes all the more ‘autonomous’ the nearer a being is to God—*quanto aliqua natura Deo vicinior, tanto minus ab eo inclinatur et magis nata est seipsam inclinare* (*De veritate*, q. 22, a. 4). . . . This ‘nearer’ can signify God’s more generous gift of freedom, which includes the risk of drawing Lucifer’s response—or it can signify the insight, on the part of limited freedom, that it can only cast off these limits and attain to complete freedom by progressively drawing nearer to God.”⁶³ This ambivalence of human freedom determines the dramatic character of historical events. The drama of sin and redemption, of the response of faith and charity, and of contemplation and action are inserted here.⁶⁴ Here opens the space of Thomas’s and Balthasar’s theology.

⁶² Ibid., 5:447.

⁶³ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 2:272.

⁶⁴ Balthasar has given ample consideration to the relationship between contemplation and action in Thomas, above all in his commentary on *Summa theologiae* II–II, questions 171 through 182. Cf. *Vollständige, ungekürzte deutsch-lateinische Ausgabe der*

Twentieth-Century Thomism and the Originality of Balthasar's Interpretation

What, in the end, is the contribution that Balthasar's interpretation of Thomas's philosophy makes to twentieth-century Thomism? Balthasar's historiographical contribution is his view of Aquinas's philosophy as original but not self-contained and as standing in continuity with the Church Fathers and with other scholastics. This way of regarding Aquinas contrasts with a certain Neo-Thomism while being consonant with more recent and more prudent scholarship. Moreover, Balthasar's reading has the merits of a certain "German" interpretation of Thomas (attentive to the romantic and idealist sensibility), which avoids putting his thought on the same level as a rationalistic scholasticism.⁶⁵ And Balthasar does this, however, without running the risks of a certain transcendental reading⁶⁶ that impoverishes the approach to being and the gratuitousness and unpredictability of being and of revelation, which distinguish Aquinas's thought.⁶⁷ Perhaps one

Summa Theologica II-II, Band 23, *Besondere Gnadengaben und die zwei Wege menschlichen Lebens kommentiert von Urs von Balthasar* (Heidelberg: Kerle-Pustet, 1954). Cf. Balthasar, *Explorations* 1:238–39: "Though [Thomas] placed the *religio mixta* above the purely contemplative, he made the *vita eremitica* higher than the *vita socialis*, since 'the perfect man is sufficient to himself,' however much the *vita socialis* was necessary to bring him to his perfection. It is astonishing how long it took for me to see that this self-sufficient perfection, to be Christian, must be, in a mysterious sense, a life fruitful for the Church, radiating out into the apostolate. The lack of this perception makes the arguments of the Fathers and the Scholastics for the superiority of contemplation not fully convincing. . . . Admittedly the fruit of contemplation cannot be assessed in the terms of this world. That part of it that Thomas saw, the effect on teaching and preaching, is only a small one. The greater part of it remains hidden in the mystery of God's action, in the invisible action of grace over the entire Church, indeed the whole of mankind."

⁶⁵ In this regard Balthasar's interpretation has affinities with those of Josef Pieper and Gustav Siewerth, for example.

⁶⁶ Cf. Balthasar, *Glory* 5:462: "The ontological distinction (between finite and infinite existence) is most clearly held by Descartes in his theory that man's reason is finite while his will (striving, *eros*) is infinite: a Platonic idea, mediated by the Franciscan school, which finds expression in Kant in the distinction between pure and practical reason and in the modern Christian Kantian school (including the superseding of Kant: Blondel, Maréchal, Marc, Rahner, *inter al.*) as the distinction between conceptual knowledge and the infinite dynamism of the spirit, *représentation* and *affirmation*."

⁶⁷ Cf. Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style*, trans. J. T. and A. C. T. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 27–28: "The central place and, above all, the nature which transcendentals enjoy in Balthasar's thought indicate how far removed this thought is from the Kantian-idealist concept of transcendental. This is one of the differences that explains the serious divergence in opinion which, at a certain point in their lives, separated Rahner and Balthasar. In effect, for

explanation of the difference between Balthasar's and transcendental Thomism's interpretations of Aquinas is to be found in the fact that Balthasar's interpretation is influenced, in a moderate way, by Hegel, the later Schelling, the later Heidegger, and by twentieth-century Jewish dialogical thought, while the interpretation of transcendental Thomism is guided largely by Kant, Fichte, and the early Heidegger.

Taking a look back at what we have reflected on in this essay, there seem to be three essential themes in the Balthasarian interpretation of Thomas's philosophy: (1) the theme of the experience of being as a *convenientia* of man and the world and the necessity of the different transcendental approaches for having this experience of being; (2) the structurally "polar" character of finite beings particularly evident in the polarity of the act of existence and essence—here Balthasar opposes both "essentialism" and a certain excessive emphasis on the act of existence at the expense of essence;⁶⁸ (3) the "gift" character of both essence and the act of existence, which necessarily refers us, by force of metaphysical participation, to a God who is Being, Freedom, and Love—here Balthasar opposes an excessively intellectualistic interpretation of Aquinas's metaphysics that was quite prominent at the beginning of the twentieth century.

What is perhaps a shortcoming of the Balthasarian reading of Thomas, or, from another point of view, its merit, is its lack of consideration of the argumentative, logical-Aristotelian dimension of Thomas's thought. Balthasar, of course, is well aware of this aspect of the Angelic Doctor's thought. In fact, Balthasar observes how the unity of intellectual rigor and a certain piety in Thomas has affinities with Goethe—another author dearly loved by Balthasar: "Goethe was just as much a lone fighter in his

Rahner, following Kant, the transcendental is, for all intents and purposes, never truly worked out thematically. In a certain sense it can be said that for Rahner the movement toward being through the transcendental positively requires as its condition that little time be spent analyzing the transcendentals in contingent beings. The path is that of abstraction from the concrete in which being appears. For Balthasar, precisely the opposite is true: the more deeply I delve into the transcendental in the individual essences in which being reveals itself, the more deeply do they reveal being to me. The essence is a fragment in which being subsists; it will never be able to deplete being, but in this essence being reveals itself and its transcendentals. Just as being is predicable analogically, so are the transcendentals. Balthasar's genius will show itself in the extraordinary elaboration of this principle."

⁶⁸ This is occasionally the risk in the interpretations of Thomas proposed by E. Gilson and C. Fabro. In my view, while maintaining the inseparability of the two principles, in any being we must affirm the priority of the act of being over the essence inasmuch as we can cognize essences only because they manifest themselves to us in beings in act, which are actuated by the act of existence.

age as Thomas Aquinas had been when he sought to combine exact intellectual research and intellectual work with a reverentially pious perception of the divine presence in the cosmos. For without uniting the two, there can be no attitude objective enough to do justice to existence.”⁶⁹ **N-V**

⁶⁹ Balthasar, *Glory* 5:363.

